

When to spank

U.S. News & World Report

April 13, 1998

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Dad and Mom are no fools: They know their '90s parenting manuals. So when 4-year-old Jason screams, "No!" and darts under the dining room table when it's time to leave Grandma's, Dad patiently crouches down. "Remember, Jason," he says soothingly, "when we talked earlier about leaving?" Jason, scowling, doesn't budge. His mother shifts uneasily and riffles through her mental Rolodex of tips garnered from all those child-rearing books. She offers Jason choices ("Would you like to come out by yourself, or shall I get you?"), then rewards ("I've got a cookie for you to eat in the car"), and finally consequences ("Get out or no Arthur tomorrow!"). Jason retreats further and cries, "I don't want to!" His parents look at each other wearily. Jason is a bright, cheerful child who, like most spirited kids, is gifted at pushing limits. He is often well-behaved, but lately, when his parents ask him to do something, he seems to melt down entirely, screaming and even biting. Now he sticks out his tongue and announces, "I hate you!" His father hauls the tiny tyrant, kicking and flailing, out from under the table. Jason lets loose an earsplitting yell. Dad, red-faced, finally loses it, raising his hand over his son's rear end.

Now stop the action. If Jason's father reads the newspapers and listens to TV news, he knows spanking is one of the more destructive things he can do to his kid, that it could turn Jason into an angry, violent child--and perhaps, some day, a depressed, abusive adult. He may even have heard the familiar refrain of child-development specialists, who contend that a parent who uses corporal punishment "is a parent who has failed." Yet he also feels instinctively that a mild pop on the rear might get Jason's attention in a way negotiating won't. Besides, his dad spanked him occasionally, and he didn't turn into an ax-wielding monster.

In fact, the notion advanced by a slew of American child-raising authorities that a couple of well-placed swats on the rear of your beloved preschooler irreparably harms him or her is essentially a myth. Antispanking crusaders relied on inconclusive studies to make sweeping overgeneralizations about spanking's dangers. This week, even the American Academy of Pediatrics is expected to tone down its blanket injunction against spanking, though it still takes a dim view of the practice and encourages parents to develop discipline alternatives. An AAP conference on corporal punishment in 1996 concluded that in certain circumstances, spanking may be an effective backup to other forms of discipline. "There's no evidence that a child who is spanked moderately is going to grow up to be a criminal or antisocial or violent," says S. Kenneth Schonberg, a pediatrics professor who co-chaired the conference. In fact, the reverse may be true: A few studies suggest that when used appropriately, spanking makes small children less likely to fight with others and more likely to obey their parents.

Some caveats are in order. By "spanking," the AAP and other authorities mean one or two flat-handed swats on a child's wrist or rear end, not a sustained whipping with Dad's belt. Neither the AAP nor any other child-development specialists believe that spanking should be the sole or preferred means of child discipline, or that it should be administered when a parent is very angry, or that it should be used with adolescents or children under 2 years old. Most experts who approve of spanking suggest it be used sparingly, as an adjunct to other discipline techniques.

Children are people. The origins of the antispanking prohibition have a lot to do with two social phenomena of postwar America: the rise of popular psychology and the breakup of the extended family. In years past, grandparents used to inundate a new mother with child-raising tips on everything from burping to bed-wetting. One of them was likely to be "spare the rod and spoil the child," an adage some adults used to justify repeated spankings as the only form of discipline--and not just in the home. Half a century ago, corporal punishment in schools was legal in all but one state. But by the early 1950s, young couples increasingly began to look to child-rearing "experts"--authors like Benjamin Spock, whose manual *Baby and Child Care* counseled against the punitive child-raising practices of earlier generations. Spock, a believer in firm and consistent

parenting, did not rule out spanking in his book's early editions. But he salted his manual with concepts borrowed from Freudian theory, stressed the impact that parents have on their kids' development, and introduced what at the time was a radical notion: Children are individual little people, with a host of psychic needs.

The psychologists and child-development authorities who churned out parenting guides in the 1970s and 1980s took Spock one step further, advocating a new, child-centered view of family. The locus of power should shift, these experts seemed to suggest, so that kids are equal members of the household. Many writers, such as T. Berry Brazelton, warned that strict parenting, and particularly punishments like spanking, could promote aggression and discourage children from cooperating with others. One of the most popular of the new crop of books was Thomas Gordon's 1970 million-plus seller, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, which advised parents to stop punishing kids and to start treating them "much as we treat a friend or a spouse." More recently, writers like Nancy Samalin and Barbara Coloroso counseled an end to punishment altogether. And while such books helped open parents' eyes to the importance of listening to children and respecting their individuality, some warm, fuzzy--and not very reasonable--ideas about discipline also began to gain popularity. (One author suggested that if a child refused to get dressed in the morning, parents should send him to school in pajamas.)

This onslaught of advice did not, on the surface, appear to alter parents' attitudes toward spanking very much. Last year, 65 percent of Americans approved of spanking, not much less than the 74 percent who did so in 1946. But the modest overall shift in numbers concealed a marked change in opinion among the American elite. By the 1990s, the refusal to spank had, in some quarters, become a sign of enlightened parenting. In a 1997 poll, 41 percent of college-educated Americans disapproved of spanking children, compared with only 20 percent of those who didn't complete high school. Whites were more than twice as likely to disapprove of spanking as blacks, and the rich were less likely to favor the practice than the poor.

"Parents became intimidated by expertise," argues Kevin Ryan, director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, who thinks the antspanking movement has become too absolutist. "Psychologists and educators corrupted parents, saying that all it takes are rational appeals to a child's better side." Danielle Crittenden, a mother of two and editor of the *Women's Quarterly*, a conservative journal, adds that "if you say you swat your kid, people now look at you like you're a child abuser. You can't even talk about it because people are so hysterical."

Against spanking. Compounding parents' guilt were two books published in the mid-'90s by researchers Irwin A. Hyman and Murray A. Straus that seemed to solidify the antspanking consensus. In *Beating the Devil Out of Them*, Straus, a respected sociologist at the University of New Hampshire who has done groundbreaking research on child and spouse abuse, concluded that spanking children is a "major psychological and social problem" that can doom a child to a lifetime of difficulties ranging from juvenile delinquency to depression, sexual hangups, limited job prospects, and lowered earnings. Straus's 1994 book won raves from well-known child-development experts like Brazelton and Penelope Leach, who applauded him for spotlighting a link between spanking and violence in society. Hyman, a psychologist at Temple University, made much the same point in his 1997 manual, *The Case Against Spanking*, and promoted his views in numerous appearances on the talk-show circuit.

For Straus and Hyman, spanking became almost a unified field theory connecting seemingly disparate social problems. "We really want to get rid of violence," Hyman said last year in an interview on CNN. "And we really want to improve children's self-esteem and behavior. We should pass a law against spanking." Straus went even further, asserting that spanking helps foster punitive social attitudes, such as support for bombing raids to punish countries that support terrorists. If parents stop spanking, Straus said on ABC-TV news last year, "we'll have . . . lower costs to deal with crime and with mental illness."

The problem with Straus and Hyman's pronouncements was that they were based on a body of research that is at best inconclusive and at worst badly flawed. It is virtually impossible to examine the effects of

spanking in isolation, uncontaminated by other influences on behavior and development, such as the overall quality of parenting and the varying temperaments of the children in question. A "pure" study, in which researchers randomly assign children to one of two conditions--either spanking or discipline with nonphysical methods--and then track their behavior over a number of years, is for obvious reasons impractical: Few parents would agree to participate in such research.

As a result, the vast majority of studies on spanking have instead been carried out in one of two other ways. Some rely on retrospective interviews with adults, who are asked decades later to recall if they were spanked as children, and how often. Researchers then attempt to link the spanking with current behaviors like depression or spouse abuse. In the second type of study, mothers are interviewed about how often their kids misbehave and how often they spank them, and researchers look for a relationship between the two behaviors.

Neither type of study is very effective in teasing out exactly what is going on. In the case of the interview studies, it is impossible to tell if the spanking led to the misbehavior or the misbehavior led to the spanking. In the case of the retrospective studies, it is anyone's guess how accurate the adult subjects' memories are of their parents' discipline techniques. In some cases, the researchers also failed to adequately control for other factors that might have influenced the results. For instance, most of the studies conducted by Straus himself include many people who were spanked as teenagers, which most child-rearing experts agree is too old for corporal punishment. Other studies failed to distinguish between one or two taps on the rear end of a preschooler and, say, beating a child with a strap. One 1977 study of 427 third graders who were reinterviewed 10 years later found that those who had been punished more also were more likely than others to push, shove, or start fights over nothing. But "punishment" was defined as including everything from nonphysical disciplinary steps like reasoning with children or isolating them, to slapping their faces, washing their mouths out with soap, or spanking them until they cried.

The shortcomings in the research aren't just methodological quibbles--they go right to the heart of what worries parents about spanking. To

take one example, one of parents' biggest fears is that spanking might lead to child abuse. Common sense suggests--and studies confirm--that child abuse typically starts from situations where a parent is attempting to discipline a child. But no study demonstrates that spanking a child leads to abuse--indeed, it may be the other way around. Parents who end up abusing their children may misuse all forms of discipline, including spanking. Sweden, often cited as a test case, hasn't borne out the spanking prohibitionists' fears, either. After Sweden outlawed spanking by parents in 1979, reports of serious child abuse actually increased by more than 400 percent over 10 years, though the actual number of reports--583 cases in 1994--was still quite small. Sweden's experience does not prove that banning spanking creates more child abuse, but it does suggest that outlawing the practice may do little to lower the rate of child abuse.

Why take a chance? Straus and Hyman and other parenting experts concede that much research on spanking is flawed, but they believe its collective weight supports their claims. "There's enough evidence to decide we don't need it [spanking]," says Hyman, "even if the evidence isn't that strong." Besides, he asks, given the stakes, is it worth taking a chance? "The question should be turned around. We should say, 'Give me a good reason why you should hurt kids.' "

Journalists, reporting on child-rearing trends, seem to have adopted a similar approach to spanking, rarely bothering to scrutinize the claims of prohibitionists. Consider the news media coverage of a much touted study by Straus, published last year in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. His research indicated that frequent spanking (three or more times a week) of children 6 to 9 years old, tracked over a period of two years, increased a child's antisocial behavior, measured in activities like cheating, bullying, or lying. The American Medical Association, which publishes Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, issued a news release headlined "Spanking Makes Children Violent, Antisocial," and Straus's findings were reported by the three major networks and included in at least 107 newspaper and magazine stories. But neither the press release nor many of the news reports mentioned the study's gaps: that 9-year-olds who are spanked at the rate of every other day may have serious behavioral problems quite apart

from their being spanked, and that the 807 mothers in the survey were just 14 to 24 years old at the time they gave birth--hardly a representative sample. Typically, news accounts reported simply that Straus's study determined that "spanking children causes [a] 'boomerang' of misbehavior," as the Associated Press put it.

Remarkably, the same issue of Archives carried another, longer-term study by psychologist Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe that came to quite different conclusions. Unlike Straus, Gunnoe used data that tracked somewhat more children (just over 1,100) for five years (not two years), sampled older parents as well, and relied on reports from both children and adults. The researcher concluded that "for most children, claims that spanking teaches aggression seem unfounded." Gunnoe found that children ages 4 to 7 who had been spanked got in fewer, not more, fights at school. (The reverse was true with white boys ages 8 to 11 in single-mother families, who Gunnoe suggested might be less accepting of parental authority.) Yet there was no AMA press release on the Gunnoe study, and none of the network reports and only 15 of the 107 newspaper and magazine stories on Straus's research mentioned Gunnoe's contrary findings.

Outside the not-so-watchful eye of the media, researchers have been reassessing the conventional wisdom on spanking for several years. In 1996, psychologist Robert E. Larzelere, director of residential research at Boys Town in Nebraska, which does not allow spanking, published the results of a sweeping review of spanking research, in which he examined 166 studies and came to several unexpected conclusions. Rejecting research that was not peer-reviewed, that included overly severe or abusive punishment (causing bruises or other injuries), or in which the child's behavior was not clearly preceded by the spanking, Larzelere ferreted out the 35 best studies. Among these, he failed to find any convincing evidence that nonabusive spanking, as typically used by parents, damaged children. Even more surprisingly, Larzelere's review revealed that no other discipline technique--including timeout and withdrawal of privileges--had more beneficial results for children under 13 than spanking, in terms of getting children to comply with their parents' wishes.

When Larzelere and others presented their research at the 1996 AAP conference on spanking, it prompted a quiet wave of revisionism. The two conference organizers, S. Kenneth Schonberg and Stanford B. Friedman, both pediatrics professors at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, wrote afterward in *Pediatrics*, "We must confess that we had a preconceived notion that corporal punishment, including spanking, was innately and always 'bad.' " Yet by the end of the conference, the two skeptics acknowledged that "given a relatively 'healthy' family life in a supportive environment, spanking in and of itself is not detrimental to a child or predictive of later problems."

The spanking controversy may be an abstract debate among academics, but it is a real-life dilemma for parents of young children who wrestle daily--and sometimes hourly--with disciplining their small charges. A study of 90 mothers of 2-year-olds found that they interrupted them an average of every 6 to 8 minutes to induce them to change their behavior. Shellee Godfrey, a mother of two from High Point, N.C., swore she'd never spank her kids. "I figured, I'm gonna talk to my children," she says. Then came the day when she was late for work and Jake, her strong-willed 2-year-old, refused to get dressed, repeatedly ripping off his diaper. "I was desperate. I finally popped him and said, 'You're putting this diaper on!' He looked at me, and he did it. He was fine. But I felt really bad, like I had hurt him."

Naturally, no child-development specialist is about to run out to write a book called *Why You Should Spank Your Kid*--which may be one reason why the news media have buried the notion that spanking might in some cases be a useful discipline technique. After ethicist Ryan was quoted in the *New York Times* a few years ago saying, "Mild physical punishment is appropriate in extreme cases," he says, "I never got so much hate mail about anything."

One lesson of the spanking controversy is that whether parents spank or not matters less than how they spank. "If parents use it as an occasional backup for, say, a timeout," says Larzelere, "and as part of discipline in the context of a loving relationship, then an occasional spanking can have a beneficial role." The welter of child-raising books of the past 30 years has also provided a host of alternatives to spanking that allow children to

express their feelings--a radical idea earlier in this century--while at the same time preserving firm limits on behavior. The best disciplinary approach, experts say, is to use a number of methods, including reasoning, timeouts, rewards, withdrawals of privileges, and what some experts term "natural consequences" (e.g., if a child refuses to eat his breakfast, he goes hungry that morning). Spanking seems to work best in conjunction with some of these techniques. For example, another analysis of spanking studies by Larzelere shows that when spanking is used among 2- to 6-year-olds to back up other discipline measures--such as reasoning--that have failed, it delays the next recurrence of misbehavior for twice as long as the use of reasoning alone.

For parents who choose to spank, there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to do so. Kids under 2 years old should not be spanked, because the danger of causing physical injury is too great. As for adolescents, research suggests a fairly solid correlation between spanking and increased misbehavior; grounding teens has proven more effective. The age when spanking is most useful appears to be between 2 and 6, and parents should take into account the nature of the child. A single disapproving word can bring a sensitive child to tears, while a more spirited youngster might need stronger measures. Finally, spankings should be done in private to spare children humiliation, and without anger. A parent who purposefully includes spanking as one of a range of discipline options may be less likely to use it impulsively and explosively in a moment of rage.

As for how to spank, the AAP warns against using anything other than an open hand, and only on the child's rear end or extremities. The intention should be to modify behavior, not cause pain. "A spanking is nothing more than a nonverbal way of terminating the [bad] behavior," says psychologist John Rosemond, author of *To Spank or Not To Spank*. It secures "the child's attention, so that you can send the child a clear message of disapproval and direction."

Plenty of parents feel they can deliver that message without striking their child. "Our belief is that spanking, hitting, any overt physical punishment isn't an effective technique for encouraging positive behavior," says Gerrie Nachman, a Manhattan mother of an 11-year-old son. "The last

thing we want to do is model to our son physical abuse as a way of dealing with inappropriate behavior in other people."

Parental abuse. At the other extreme are parents who deliver far more than a tap on the rear. In response to a 1995 poll, almost 20 percent of parents said they had hit a child on the bottom with a brush, belt, or stick in the past year; another 10 percent said they had spanked the child with a "hard object." One valuable lesson to come out of the antspanking movement is an awareness of how many parents abuse spanking. Straus found that two thirds of mothers of children under 6, for instance, spank them at least three times a week, which most experts would say is too much.

The current state of knowledge about spanking may cut two ways: Parents who use spanking appropriately can relax and stop feeling that they are causing ineluctable harm to their child. But parents who overspank--and mistakenly believe that their firm thwacks are benefiting little Samantha--should scale back their spankings. Somewhere in between parents' guilt and parents' denial lies a happier medium.