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PARENTING

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Children subjected to physical punishment often end up bigger troublemakers than before

Corporal punishment of children does not improve behavior, concludes a newly published study by Professor Murray A. Straus of New Hampshire University's Family Research Laboratory. In fact, far from achieving that goal, the more parents physically punish a child, the more that child is going to misbehave, the study strongly indicates. This conclusion contradicts the folk wisdom of nearly all cultures that "sparing the rod spoils the child." But Straus has insightful research to back it up.

Consider the following true story from a related study by Philip Fisher, Ph.D., a research scientist and clinical psychologist at the Oregon Social Learning Center: "Jeff's life was rough. His parents fought often. Mother used corporal punishment frequently to stop Jeff's misbehavior. But simultaneously she made her deep love for Jeff very clear, showering him with affection. At school he was aggressive towards kids, using similar methods that his mother used to punish him. He was placed in special programs. Excelling in athletics, everyone thought he was improving. Then he started to associate with gangs, and one day when a rival youth approached him, Jeff

shot him with a gun. Now he is incarcerated."

Research up to 1985, says Straus's study, shows that over 90% of US parents used corporal punishment--mainly spanking--on toddlers and over half continued into teen years. Even this is a decrease from 99% in the 1950s and 97% in 1975. There have been further decreases since 1985, but nearly all American children still get spanked.

Previous studies have found that the more the parent spanks, the greater the tendency of the child to misbehave. However, the design of these studies could not allow researchers to conclude that spanking causes the increase in misbehavior, only that, on average, it fails to reduce it--a startling conclusion in itself. Straus wanted to take the research one step further, to determine what sociologists call the "causal direction," that is, did the parents spank more because the child's behavior got naturally worse as he got older, or did the spanking actually cause the child's increased misbehavior?

"The key," says Straus, "was to measure the child's anti-social behavior level one year, then again two years later and measure the difference. Does spanking make the child a nonviolent person in the long run? Well, it's been argued for years that, no, ironically, it has the opposite effect. It tends to make the child a violent person. But parents have no way of seeing that. They can't look down the road two or three years. They only see what's happening right when they administer the punishment (i.e., the misbehavior stops). That's where the research is necessary."

His analysis used data from interviews with a national sample of 807 mothers of children in three age groups (3-5, 6-9, 10 and over), in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth from 1986 to 1990. By sophisticated statistical analysis, the study attempted to remove the effects of family socioeconomic status, sex of the child, and the extent to which the home provided emotional support and cognitive stimulation, and focus only on the relationship between spanking and behavior.

In 1986, at the beginning of the study, 44% of the mothers reported spanking during the previous week, averaging 2.1 times. (When using the word spanking, parents usually refer to several forms of physical punishment, such as slapping, caning or paddling.) Some mothers even spanked their children during the interview itself. Ten percent of the 6 to 9-year-old children were spanked three or more times. (Millions of children they represent would have the greatest probability of improved behavior if their parents stopped hitting them.) An anti-social behavior scale had been developed, based on six items. Mothers were asked the extent to which each of these items described their child during the preceding three months: "cheats or tells lies," "bullies or is cruel/mean to others," "does not feel sorry after misbehaving," "breaks things deliberately and is disobedient at school," "has trouble getting along with teachers." Two years later all the mothers were interviewed again. As Straus had predicted, the more spanking, the higher the level of anti-social behavior reported. Findings were parallel for all ages. Girls had a lower level of anti-social behavior, which Straus attributes to their being generally better behaved than boys, regardless of what parents do.

Professor Straus concludes his study, "I believe in years ahead,

corporal punishment as a cause of anti-social behavior will receive the same broad endorsement that smoking as a cause of lung cancer is now receiving. Because most US children experience corporal punishment, our findings suggest that nearly all American children could benefit from a reduction or elimination of corporal punishment. Moreover, taking into account research showing that anti-social behavior in childhood is associated with violence and other crimes as an adult, society as a whole, not just children, could benefit from ending the system of violent child rearing that goes under the euphemism of spanking."

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