

[To Beat or Not to Beat?](#)

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PARENTING

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How spanking children leads to adult problems

He calls it the conspiracy of silence: the universal and chronic use of corporal punishment in America. Prof. Murray A. Straus, founder and co-director of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire, says it is one of America's best-kept secrets. Straus spent two decades researching the extent of spanking, hitting and slapping and the effects such punishment has on children when they grow older. The results of studying over nine-thousand families were published in a 1994 sociology textbook, *Beating the Devil Out of Them*, a scholarly, statistical exposé authored by Straus with contributions by Denise A. Donnelly and over 50 other scholars.

The book derives its name from the Christian idea of original sin and being possessed by the devil. Now many parents believe in a modern version--the stubborn or willful child. Straus calls it "virtuous violence" because few books or agencies on child rearing advise against hitting a child. He states that this reflects an almost overwhelming approval of corporal punishment by the American public.

Few parents realize the damage they may be causing their children, who learn that love and violence go hand in hand. Employing graphs and bar charts throughout the book, Straus presents statistics which indicate that corporal punishment leads to delinquency as a child and crime as an adult. Problems such as depression, suicide, drinking, wife or husband beating, masochistic sex and lowered earnings are shown to be likely results. Straus feels that by putting an end to corporal punishment, many other kinds of violence in the world can be prevented.

What is most alarming is the near-total resistance Straus receives to the idea of complete abstinence from hitting. To the American public, even the thought of no physical discipline is ludicrous. Will there ever be a time when parents will not feel the necessity to spank? Straus says yes, but it will happen slowly. Like smoking, which was condoned a generation ago and condemned today, hitting will eventually emerge as an anti-social act with serious costs to public health.

In 1979, Sweden became the first country to make spanking illegal, followed by Norway, Finland, Denmark and Austria. This was one of the first indications that the idea of raising children without hitting was taking hold outside academic life.

Straus is now involved in an experiment in which one small city is engaging in a community-wide project to become a "no-hitter community." The program is designed to reach parents directly and is based on the idea that parents need support from their relatives, neighbors and friends to change hurtful attitudes.

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