

Physical Punishment:

What Parents Should Know

As a toddler, Jesse was a handful. To keep him under control, his parents would hit him on the hand or thigh. When he started preschool and his teacher complained that he'd disrupted the classroom, his parents would spank him as punishment. In kindergarten, Jesse started getting into fights with other boys in his class. His father said, "If he thinks he's big enough to whip somebody at school, I'm going to whip him." His mother agreed with this approach. After all, her parents had spanked her, sometimes with a belt, and she'd turned out fine.

Physical Punishment as a Form of Discipline

Managing children's behavior is one of the biggest challenges parents face. By the time their children have reached the age of four, most American parents have used some form of physical punishment, such as spanking, hitting, or another kind of physical force.¹ Many parents think that physical punishment is an acceptable form of discipline. More than two-thirds of American adults agreed or strongly agreed that children sometimes need a "good hard spanking."²

Physical punishment may seem the best solution for managing a child's most challenging or upsetting behaviors. It may even seem like the only solution for serious misbehavior. But child behavior research shows that there are actually far more effective methods of discipline. Spanking may work temporarily to stop children's problem behaviors, but it may not change their behavior in the long run.³

By the time Jesse was in second grade, he was fighting at school, at home, and in the neighborhood. One Friday, Jesse's father found out that Jesse had gotten into trouble again at school and lied to his parents about it. He set out to spank Jesse and hit him across the mouth as punishment for all his lying. When Jesse started talking back to him, he hit Jesse on his back and butt. When Jesse wouldn't stop talking back, his father hit him harder and harder. When it was all over, Jesse was crying hysterically.

Possible Risks

One problem with physical punishment is that it can escalate gradually into more extreme actions that can cause serious harm to a child. Over time, it may take more and more force to have the same effect. For example, a stern “no” and a swat on the hand may be enough to get your two-year-old child to behave. When your child is three, it may take one spanking with a hand a month to have the same impact. By the time your child turns seven, it may take two or three spankings with a belt every month to control his or her behavior. Physical punishment can keep escalating to the point of causing severe pain and injury, and it can lead to physical abuse.⁴

Child behavior research shows that there are more effective ways than physical punishment to discipline a child.

Child physical abuse occurs when parents injure their children. This can happen when physical punishment goes too far and causes injuries like bruises, broken bones, cuts, red marks, and welts. Parents may not believe that what they are doing is abusive—they may think that what they are doing is no different than what other parents are doing. However, it is never okay to injure a child. In fact, it is against the law in the United States and may result in parents being reported to child protective services and to the police.⁵ It may even result in a child being removed from the home.

Even if a child is not injured, physical punishment can harm the relationship between a parent and a child. Children may become fearful of their parents and less likely to talk to them openly about their feelings and problems. It is very confusing for children when parents, the people they depend on and love the most, hurt them. Being physically hurt by a parent may cause a child to feel angry, helpless, powerless, guilty, or ashamed, and can affect the child’s emotional and mental development and school performance.⁴ Children may feel stressed and find it harder to behave.

Some children, like Jesse, may even respond to physical punishment by becoming more aggressive, striking out at classmates, friends, siblings, and even their parents, creating a pattern of using violence to solve problems. Both research studies and parents have reported these problems with many children who have been physically disciplined.⁶ What sometimes looks like a straightforward and appropriate method of disciplining children may turn out to be ineffective and potentially harmful to children and families.

On Saturday morning, when Jesse’s father saw the black and blue marks on his son’s body and realized the harm he had inflicted, he felt terrible. What he’d done to Jesse reminded him of what his own father had done to him. He remembered how angry and resentful he’d felt after his father’s punishments. He wanted something better for himself and his son. It was time to try something else.

Alternatives to Physical Punishment

The best way to be sure that you will not harm your child physically or emotionally is to find alternatives to physical punishment that are practical, effective, and safe. A good

place to start is to ask yourself: What do I really want to teach my child about how to behave? What values am I hoping to instill? What kind of adult do I want him or her to grow up to be?

- *Raising Well-Behaved Kids: What Parents Should Know*

A companion factsheet by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/raisingwellbehavedkids_factsheet.pdf

- *Twelve Alternatives to Lashing Out At Your Child*

Prevent Child Abuse America

http://www.preventchildabuse.org/publications/parents/downloads/twelve_alternatives.pdf

- *Positive Discipline: What It Is and How to Do It*

The Center for Effective Discipline

<http://www.stophitting.com/pdf/PositiveDiscipline-WhatItIsandHowToDolt.pdf>

One possible alternative is a behavior plan. Some parents have found great benefit in these plans. In a behavior plan, you decide in advance how you will reward good behaviors and discipline unacceptable behaviors, and then share your intentions with your child. That way, you and your child both know how you are going to respond.

A behavior plan can reduce the odds of a parent acting impulsively or out of anger. Although it may seem like a lot of work to create and begin using a behavior plan, many parents have found this approach effective in managing their child's behavior and reducing the stress of parenting. If you need help, a counselor can work with you to create a behavior plan.

If you are a parent who has relied on physical punishment to discipline your child, it can be hard to change, particularly if you yourself grew up receiving physical punishment. Fortunately, many communities now have professionals who can help parents learn about alternative methods of discipline and behavior management. Their services often include working with parents to create a behavior plan designed to meet their family's needs. By working with a therapist, you and your child can identify ideas that may improve your relationship, make your job as a parent more gratifying, and improve the quality of life for your family.

Professional Help

Jesse's dad talked with Jesse's mom over the next few days and they decided to get Jesse some therapy for his behaviors. When they met with the therapist, he suggested that the whole family attend therapy together to work on managing Jesse's behaviors and improving the family's relationships.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.NCTSN.org

If you are already involved in—or are scheduled to participate in—counseling, this factsheet may offer some useful ideas to discuss with your provider. To find a counselor or other resources, call 211 (a national referral service available in most states) to find someone in your area who can help.

Over the next several months, Jesse and his parents met with the therapist on a weekly basis. By the time they graduated from therapy, Jesse had learned to control his anger and his parents had learned better ways to manage Jesse's behavior. They also learned how to communicate more openly and to solve problems before they got out of control. Now, Jesse is doing better in school and is getting along with the kids in the neighborhood. His parents feel less stress and no longer feel the need to use physical discipline.

References

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Established by Congress in 2000, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) is a unique collaboration of academic and community-based service centers whose mission is to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for traumatized children and their families across the United States. Combining knowledge of child development, expertise in the full range of child traumatic experiences, and attention to cultural perspectives, the NCTSN serves as a national resource for developing and disseminating evidence-based interventions, trauma-informed services, and public and professional education.

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