

To Spank or Not to Spank: Why Spanking Should Be Discouraged

By Eliza Cook and Kimberly Kopko

Spanking—hitting a child on the bottom with an open hand—is a common discipline approach used for children in the U.S. Most parents who spank believe that spanking will teach their children what is right and wrong; however, recent research finds that spanking should be discouraged as a discipline strategy.

This fact sheet highlights reasons to eliminate spanking as a disciplinary tool, as well as other strategies parents can use instead of spanking. All suggestions are adopted from research in a recent publication, *Spanking and Child Development: We Know Enough Now to Stop Hitting Our Children* by Elizabeth Gershoff (2013).

Why spanking should be discouraged:

- **Spanking sends mixed messages.** Many children report feelings of fear, anger, and sadness after being spanked. It can be very frightening and confusing for a child to be hit by a parent whom they love and depend on. Even if after spanking their child, a parent calmly explains the reasons why a child should act a certain way, it will be difficult for the child to listen and internalize the explanation because they will also be feeling frightened and distressed.
- **Spanking teaches the wrong message.** Children cannot learn through spanking alone why their behavior was incorrect. In fact, spanking teaches children to behave only when the threat of physical punishment is present. Once the threat of physical punishment is gone, children may feel little motivation to behave appropriately. Because there are many times when children are away from parents that require appropriate behavior, such as school or in after school activities, this can be very problematic.
- **Spanking is linked with increases in child aggression.** Researchers have conducted several rigorous studies and found that children who are spanked have increased levels of aggression. It is true that more aggressive children tend to be spanked, but even when researchers took baseline aggression levels into account, they still found that spanking increased aggression levels of children.
- **Spanking is linked with an increase risk of child abuse.** A majority of child abuse cases by parents begin with parents using spanking as a disciplinary tool. In some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between child abuse and spanking. It is especially problematic if parents use spanking when they are

upset, emotional, and frustrated as it is more likely that spanking will cross the line into unintentional child abuse. If parents are encouraged to use other discipline tactics besides spanking, such as using time outs and talking to the child about their behavior, it may minimize the likelihood of future child abuse cases.

- **Spanking yields negative effects across cultures.** Recent research has found that negative effects of spanking occur across race and ethnicity. One rigorous study found that spanking predicted increases in children's problem behaviors over time across White, Black, Latino, and Asian populations.
- **Spanking is discouraged by professional and community organizations.** Very prominent organizations have begun to abandon spanking as a parenting practice. In addition, prominent religious organizations, such as the United Methodist Church and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, have also passed resolutions that encourage parents to avoid spanking.
- **Many countries and international human rights advocates also discourage spanking.** All over the world, spanking is being discouraged. The United Nations has stated that spanking is considered a form of violence and it should be banned in all contexts. Other international human rights organizations have made similar claims as well. For example, 33 countries have banned spanking of children, even by parents. And in some countries, such as Sweden, spanking is a crime.

What strategies should parents use instead of spanking?

- **Use time-outs.** One study found that time-outs had similar results as spanking when children were asked to comply with various parental requests. However, time-outs are a much better disciplinary choice because parents avoid sending mixed messages to their children and prevent other negative outcomes previously discussed in this fact sheet.
- **Communicate the reasons why something is right or wrong to your child.** It is important that children understand the reasons why something is right or wrong. To do this, parents and caregivers should have conversations with their child(ren) to explain the reasons why the child should have behaved differently, why their actions may hurt themselves or others, and what they should have done. Even if only time-outs were used, with no discussion, children will not learn the reasons why something was right or wrong.
- **Take time to calm down before you discipline your child.** As previously discussed, spanking can lead to child abuse if parents are not careful. If parents feel frustrated or at risk of spanking, they should take some time to calm down before disciplining their child. This tactic will help children internalize parents' messages more effectively because the child will be able

to focus on the message instead of feeling in constant fear of how the parent may react.

Conclusion

Although spanking is still a common disciplinary practice in the U.S., research demonstrates that spanking is ineffective and harmful to children. Additionally, prominent professional, religious and human rights organizations support and promote the elimination of spanking practices. Parents are therefore strongly encouraged to eliminate spanking as a disciplinary strategy and instead, implement alternative strategies to discipline their child(ren).

Visit the *Parenting in Context* project at:

<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/>

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Kimberly Kopko is a Senior Extension Associate in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University.

Eliza Lathrop Cook is a Masters of Public Administration Fellow in the Cornell Institute of Public Affairs at Cornell University.



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