Punishment in Childrearing: Several Perspectives

Paul W. Robinson
Bradley L. Edgington

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol9/iss4/3

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
I wish I had something witty to say in introducing what is to be discussed in this monograph on punishment. Heaven knows, few topics stimulate the sparks and emotion that punishment does. But after literally hours of trying to come up with some poignant opening, I could not come up with anything that could effectively communicate my feelings about what is to be said.

I wanted these remarks to point out how vital this issue is to future generations. I wanted these remarks to communicate a sincerity in what is to be said, and also include encouragement for the reader to take the following comments in the spirit of goodwill and honest concern in which they were intended.

Story of Brian

As a lead-in to the purpose of my lecture, let me tell you a true story about Brian. Brian was born when his unwed mother was thirty-four years old. At age four his mother died. The relatives gathered together and decided Brian should be adopted by Larry, an up and coming businessman, and his wife Diane. They already had two boys, ages four and two.

Now Brian was an unusual four-year-old in several ways. He weighed 84 pounds, was known for throwing violent tantrums, and was exceptionally bright. He and his mother lived with her parents. She did nothing but watch TV soap operas all day long. Almost since birth, Brian was kept in a play pen and was given food every time he made a fuss. On one occasion when Brian was three years old he complained to his mother that he was sick and going to throw up. “You better make it to the bathroom, and not throw up. “You better make it to the bathroom, and not throw up on the rug.” she yelled. About halfway to the bathroom Brian fell to his knees and began vomiting. His mother rushed over and beat him for not making it to the bathroom.

Brian’s elderly grandparents catered to his every wish. If he became frightened by something (which often occurred), they would be quick to console him. To put it mildly, Brian’s life was a confusing mixture of pampering and abuse. Around other young children Brian was physically abusive.

When Brian moved in with Larry and Diane, his world changed dramatically. He was allowed to pick out the wallpaper for his room, and allowed to choose his furniture. His new parents were well educated, patient, and loving.

On one occasion when Brian misbehaved, Diane spanked him and sent him to his room. One half hour later when she went to see how he was doing, she found one of the bannister supports had been kicked out. Upon entering Brian’s room, she found the wallpaper had been torn off in many places, and the levelers had been cut in several places. “I’ll bet you don’t send me to my room again” were the first words Brian spoke to her.

On a later occasion after being disciplined, Brian went to his room, messed on the floor, then spread the mess all over the walls with his hands.

On two occasions he was violent with Larry and Diane’s two year old. One time he took a six-inch wood screw and dug deep ruts in the two-year-old’s back. On a second occasion Brian was earnestly strangling the two year old when Diane came in the room.

After several consultations and testing sessions with a clinical psychologist, the five-year-old Brian was sent to an institutional psychiatric program for some months. When Brian was returned, his new parents and the psychologist felt he was worse than when he went in. At the request of this psychologist, my wife and I took Brian into our home. We were told that every type of positive approach had been tried on Brian with no success.

It did not take long until Brian began acting violently around our home. On one occasion he was observed intentionally laying on top of and trying to squash some very small puppies. On another occasion he took a three-year-old who was on her hands and knees and quickly smashed her face into a wooden floor—seemingly for no reason at all.

Now, in our home we believe in being positive, but we also believe that certain actions need to be punished. One day Brian became angry at my wife, Carol, when she reprimanded him for being mean. He went to the bathroom, messed and began to spread it around. My wife proceeded to use some good old applied psychology. After spanking him, he was made to clean up the mess. Later that night he retaliated by wetting on his bedroom floor. His action was met with my wife’s same reaction. With tears still in his eyes and holding his bottom, he whimperishly said to Carol, “Diane never spanked me like that before.”

Apparently sensing Carol was as determined as he, Brian came to me later that day and tried to get me to intercede in his behalf and stop my wife from spanking him. During our little talk he said, “Don’t she realize spanking me hurts my brain?” Brian's remark somewhat surprised me, for I knew it was hurting him, but that hurt seemed to be centered in a different location.

As I thought a moment about what he said, I realized somewhere in his past he had heard some adult say something to the effect that spankings hurt children psychologically. And this young man knew exactly how to turn that statement to his advantage.
Now, to shorten a long story, suffice it to say that the approach we took was to very specifically provide Brian with positive support and attention when he expressed socially acceptable actions, and make sure that misbehavior on his part did not pay off. As time passed Brian began acting more and more like what we so often call a normal child. Interestingly enough, Brian showed no aversion to Carol or myself. In fact, he often asked to sit on our laps while watching TV, and followed us all around.

Now, Brian had been placed in an institutional setting which focused its approach on using totally positive type therapeutic systems to deal with problem children. According to the rules of that institution, corporal punishment could not be used.

I am often asked how I can condone the use of physical punishment. Two questions I often hear are—

“How come you believe in spanking? I thought all psychologists felt it is wrong,” and “How can you be a compassionate Christian and Mormon, and believe in punishment?”

Because the issue of punishment is such an important issue in family living and because I would like to share with you why I have come to the conclusion I have about the role of punishment in the family, I would like to discuss it from several perspectives. I would like to review what the psychological research has to say, what the scriptures have to say, and what role punishment seems to naturally play in everyday life.

Perhaps it is important to keep in mind what my position on punishment is right from the start. I believe that parents in general have been told that punishing children is not only ineffective in dealing with children, but is actually harmful, and should not be done. I believe many child-rearing professionals champion that point of view. On the other hand, my position is that there are times that punishment can be very effective in controlling misbehavior in children. I certainly do not see punishment as the main mechanism for guiding children’s thoughts and actions; but it is a natural and important part of life. I see the role of punishment like salt in the diet. It is an essential ingredient of life, but a little, wisely used, goes a long way.

The Position of Psychological Research on Punishment

The position psychological research and child-rearing professionals take on punishment seems to vary, depending on whether one looks at (1) the statements made in popular books by child-rearing professionals, (2) college texts in the area of learning, (3) published research studies on punishment, or (4) books reviewing the research on punishment.

Published Parenting Philosophies

As we look at the position of the psychological profession on punishment, perhaps we should start with what some of the most popular child-rearing personalities and books say about punishment.

A well-known child-rearing personality, Eda LeShan, often heard on the east coast, comes out strongly against punishment. In her book, Natural Parenthood, she addresses the question of whether spanking is a legitimate form of discipline. Her answer is, and I quote, “No, it is not. Unequivocably! It may release your anger and clear the air when the atmosphere has gotten pretty tense and wound up, but it does not teach any constructive lesson about human relations” (LeShan, 1970).

One of the most popular parenting approaches in the country for the past ten years has been STEP which are letters standing for Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1982). According to STEP philosophy, punishment should not be intentionally administered to children. STEP claims punishment naturally produces results such as sneakiness, irresponsibility, fear, desire for revenge, confusion, rebellion, and guilt in children.

When I first read this I searched for solid research which specifically demonstrated that punishment is the cause of these results in children. I could not find any.

Now STEP’s ideas about punishment actually come from two individuals who began writing about child-rearing in the early 1900s. Alfred Adler emphasized the futility of corporal punishment and said, “Corporal punishment in children leads to low courage in adulthood.” Strongly influenced by Adler, Rudolph Dreikurs became an ardent opponent of punishment. In The Challenge of Child Training (Dreikurs, 1972) he responds to the question of punishment helping to properly mold children by saying:

But physical punishment is never requisite to this end, even when the child regards it as deserved. If parents only knew what their child feels and thinks when they strike him, they would recoil in horror and never lay a hand on him again. In the moment of chastisement, children who are frequently beaten develop frightening thoughts of hate and fury. (p. 103)

Haim Ginott’s books (i.e. 1965) on parenting argue that spanking is wrong. He contends there are more civilized and natural ways to handle misbehavior such as discussing misdeeds openly. Sigmund Freud claimed punishing children created the most undesirable neurotic anxieties in them (Walters & Grusec, 1977).

Thomas Gordon developed PET, one of the most popular parenting systems in the country. Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) argues strongly against the use of punishment and discipline in child rearing as the following quote illustrates. In the book, PET in Action (1976), when talking about disciplining, Dr. Gordon says:

...I know of no other belief in disciplining that causes parents more trouble. In fact, I’ve become convinced that it is actually a very dangerous belief: it alienates parents and children and contributes heavily toward the deterioration of parent-child relationships.

I could continue to cite popular books on parenting, but I think I have made the point. For several decades punishment has been overwhelmingly labeled in child-rearing books as a most unacceptable means of dealing with misbehaving children. Parents have been told in rather strong terms that punishing children is not only ineffective, but actually damaging. These parenting approaches that have been popular for the past twenty years would argue that the possibility of punishment being effective even in some situations would be unthinkable. It is also important to keep in mind that seldom if ever is any research cited to support this idea.
College Learning Texts

In contrast to popular child-rearing philosophies, almost every college text dealing with the experimental analysis of the learning process claims that punishment works. In the book Manipulating Parents (1981) the following comments are recorded about some of the more respected texts and reference books:


On page 233 of one of the more popular texts used in Psychology of Learning courses Schwartz says "Is punishment effective? In light of all the evidence discussed in the preceding pages, it seems odd that one should ask this question at all. If the experiments we have been discussing show anything at all, surely it must be that punishment works."


In Chapter Nine of this highly acclaimed basic research learning reference text, the point is concluded on page 433 that punishment is more effective than the other popular psychological strategies in reducing undesirable behavior.


This book is most likely the number one selling text on learning used in college and universities. When talking about the practical use of punishment, the authors state "...it is useful to recognize that the use of suppression produced by punishment can be an important technique to incorporate in clinical settings." (p. 158).

How is it possible that college texts specializing in the learning process could make such statements when child-rearing books argue so adamantly against punishment? Perhaps the answer becomes more apparent by looking at the research done on punishment.

Published Research Studies on Punishment

With the advent of control groups and statistical tested significance in the 1920s and 30s, the first serious attempts at determining whether punishment worked was begun. Edward Thorndike conducted several experiments on college students in which they were asked to select one of five Spanish words that might mean the same as an English word appearing beside them. If the subjects made the wrong choice, Thorndike punished them by saying "WRONG." From this Thorndike concluded punishment was ineffective in the modification of behavior (Thorndike, 1911).

In 1938, B. F. Skinner trained rats to press levers to receive food. After training, some rats received a slap on their paws when they pressed the bar. Skinner concluded punishment (the slap in this experiment) did not reduce the bar pressing behavior, except temporarily.

William Estes (1944) shocked rats who pressed bars and collected data suggesting such punishment for pressing bars did not weaken behaviors.

The studies of Thorndike, Skinner, and Estes seemed to support the ideas of Adler, Dreikurs, and Freud that vehemently argue against punishment as a possible parenting tool. According to Walter's and Grusec's (1977) review of punishment research, these up and coming men's punishment philosophies, along with the research findings of Thorndike, Skinner, and Estes "...virtually ceased systematic investigations of the effects of punishment."

While some psychological studies were published in the 1950s suggesting punishment was ineffective (i.e., Sears, Macoby, and Levine's well cited 1957 survey of 379 parents with children from one to five years old), it wasn't until the 1960s that a few solid experimental investigations strongly suggested the previous conclusions about punishment were wrong. In 1964 Richard Solomon, a well respected researcher, reviewed the punishment literature and asked how the psychological profession could seriously argue that punishment was ineffective. In the 1960s laboratory experiments on animals conclusively demonstrated punishment is effective in reducing undesirable behaviors in animals. Present research supports Thorndike's and Skinner's early findings that "mild punishers" are not very effective, but Estes' results were clearly shown to be incorrect.

Books Reviewing Punishment Research

In the past ten years there have been two major books written that have reviewed the research done on punishment. In 1977 Joan Grusec, a Ph.D. from Stanford with main research interests in imitation and child-rearing practices, and Gary Walters, an expert in animal experimentation, collaborated to review all the research on animals and humans. In their book entitled Punishment, they concluded punishment is effective in controlling behavior, AND they point out the negative side effects often credited to punishment (i.e., causes emotional problems and trauma, causes aggression, causes avoidance, generalizes to reduce positive behaviors) are false. Walters' and Grusec's (1977, p. 253) closing statement at the end of their book is 

...a good case can be made that punishment is a more effective technique for behavior change than is reinforcement. And this leads us to an inescapable conclusion: Punishment will always be a necessary tool for behavioral change.

In 1983 Academic Press published a book authored by Saul Axelrod and Jack Aspece. The book, The Effects of Punishment on Human Behavior, also reviews the psychological research literature and emphasizes punishment including spankings can be very effective in controlling behavior. They also review and discount the oft-claimed negative side effects of punishment. They also point out some rather interesting facts uncovered by experimentation such as:

The relationship between the child and adult who administers punishment does not deteriorate but in fact improves. As long as the adult is the source of positive experiences as well as punishment (Bucher & Lovaas, 1968; Lovaas et al., 1965; Meiselman, 1973; Simmons & Lovaas, 1969; Tate & Baroff, 1969). (p. 290)

They also point out that reinforcement approaches are not always successful in helping control misbehaving children. That certainly was the case with Brian.

In my own twenty years of laboratory research on animals and field research on children, I have seen punishment be a very effective method for controlling behavior, and have not seen punishment have any of the negative side effects claimed.
Does that mean there is no research to support the idea that punishment is ineffective and damaging to children? No, it doesn't mean that at all. Any seasoned researcher knows that any topic with substantial research time devoted to it always produces studies supporting both sides of any argument. It is a natural result of testing null hypotheses. What should happen, however, is that substantially more studies should produce results supporting one position or another. And that is exactly what has happened in the case of punishment. There is much more support for the idea that punishment is effective than its alternative.

**Punishment from the Perspective of Christian Ethics**

A second perspective from which to evaluate the value of punishment is from society’s ethics. I believe it is fair to say that our country’s value system is based on the Christian ethic. So, one way to look at punishment is to look at what is said about it in the Bible.

One does not have to spend much time investigating the principles in the Bible to come to the conclusion that it is a book about brotherly love. If there is one word to describe what the teaching in the Bible centers around, it would be love—the love between husband and wife, sister and brother, parent and child.

With brotherly love as the central theme, the Bible explains that the growth of every member of the human race is based on the principle of freedom of choice. The actions of man, woman and child are not limited and totally controlled by what is often labelled as genetic instincts. Human beings have the opportunity to make choices and learn from the choices they make. These choices we are able to make are not restricted to only “correct choices.” The Bible points out that mankind can also choose to make mistakes or bad choices. In fact, according to scripture, only one person who walked this earth never made a mistake. All the rest of us fall into a group in which making mistakes has been a major factor of our actions.

In 1970 Dr. James Dobson (pp. 222–223) wrote the book *Dare to Discipline*. In his book he stated:

> The purpose of scripture is to demonstrate that the parent and relationship with his child should be modeled after God’s relationship with man. In its ultimate beauty, that interaction is characterized by abundant love—a love unparalleled in tenderness and mercy. This same love leads the benevolent father to guide, correct—and even bring some pain to the child when it is necessary for his eventual good. I find it difficult to comprehend how this message has been so thoroughly misunderstood during the past twenty years.

In Proverbs 22 verse 15 it is said, “Foolishness is found in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.”

Now some people may argue that the rod spoken of in this instance is not a paddle, but a measuring stick with which to evaluate the child. Several other passages, however, can clarify the issue.

In Proverbs 23 verses 13, 14, it is said, “Withhold not correction from the child; for if thou beatest him with the rod he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.”

I had a well educated and successful couple come to see me about their teenage daughter. The mother said, “I received my degree in psychology back east at a well known university, and was taught not to use spanking or strong forms of discipline. I can now see that some of that was needed in my home.” Her daughter, then on drugs, drinking, and running away, was then placed in a home that believed in Proverbs 23. Four months later the girl was back home with her family, and doing very well. She stayed away from her old friends and struck up a much closer relationship with her parents.

In Proverbs 29 verse 15 it is said, “The rod and reproo[f give wisdom; but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.” A popular present-day parenting belief is to let children, particularly teenagers, make all their own decisions, without reproving or using the rod at all. This scripture leaves little doubt as to the responsibility parents have in this matter.

Proverbs 29 verse 17 goes on to tell us what the results of proper correction will be. It says, “Correct thy son and he shall give ye rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.”

Hebrews 12:5–8 reads—

> And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor fain when thou art rebuked of him:
> For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.
> If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?
> But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Further on in verse 11—

Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless after it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

This verse leaves little doubt that there will be times all of us parents need to discipline to the degree it is unpleasant. Trying to be totally positive all the time will not work.

In line with these scriptures it is wise to look at how the Lord deals with his most beloved prophets. Does he put his arm around them and say, “Hey, you are my joy so I won’t let anything punitive ever happen to you. You will grow and develop through totally positive experiences.” No, even his most chosen got beat up, had great family problems, and were killed.

From the scriptures and the way the Lord treats his chosen ones, I have a difficult time believing punishment has no value in helping us grow and develop. Either punishment—including physical punishment—has a value in life, or we are watched over by a sadistic Lord.

**The Role of Punishment in Every Day Life**

Now, besides the psychological research and the scriptures, what about the role of pain and punishment in our daily lives? Is pain such as that produced by spankings cruel and unusual? Is pain a primitive and ineffective means of influencing a child’s actions?
Suppose you seriously sprained your ankle. How does your mind convince you not to walk on it? You know your mind has the power to make you think positively and suggest, 'Hey, wouldn't you like to hop around on one foot for a week or so?'

However, instead, your body uses a rather simple, straightforward and effective means to keep you off the ankle. STEP ON THAT ANKLE AND YOU WILL FEEL PAIN!

Pain is a very natural part of life that greets each of us almost daily. We catch fingers in car doors, touch hot stoves, cut our fingers, and bite our tongues on occasion.

Now there are people who irrationally get mad at doors, stoves, ankles and tongues when they feel pain, but most of us handle such painful situations without becoming neurotic or psychotic. In fact such painful experiences are usually excellent learning experiences that we obviously don't want to repeat.

Up to this point I have reviewed with you three different perspectives of punishment in an attempt to show you why I personally believe in using punishment. In the time remaining I would like to share with you a research experience which hopefully illustrates to you why I have taken the time to discuss this issue with you.

I feel thousands of teenagers are rebelling, making foolish decisions that tragically ruin their futures because we have failed to follow the admonitions of the scriptures and the research literature.

Let me tell you about a recently completed research project that substantially changed the lives and outlook on life of five families.

The Controlled Living Program

To see how effective a juvenile rehabilitative approach with corporal punishment could be, I and several other individuals agreed to work with five sets of parents who had teenage girls ranging in age from fourteen to sixteen. None of the parents were solicited for the project. All had contacted me and asked for help. Three sets of parents had previously been involved with government youth rehabilitation programs and did not want their help anymore. The other two sets of parents said they wanted private rather than governmental help with their daughters.

Using fictitious names, the Jones had twin fifteen-year-old girls whom the high school principal called the Mafia. The twins Sheri and Carrie had straight Fs for the past year for misbehaving. They were on drugs, smoking, drinking, very promiscuous, noncompliant to parental authority, and wore clothes with suggestive sayings. They ran away from home often, rifled lockers at school, and sluffed classes, they were required to stay home and be taught by the school's visiting teachers. If they sluffed classes, they were required to stay home and be taught by the school's visiting teachers. If they smoked, drank, or took drugs, restrictions to the home were instituted. Over half the punishments given the girls for misbehaving were instituted. Over half the punishments given the girls for misbehaving were in fact proposed by the other girls in the program.

The Smiths' fifteen-year-old daughter, Ann, was on drugs, smoking, and drinking. Terry was not too sharp in school. A C grade was quite unusual for her. She almost overdosed at school twice and was known by her schoolmates as one of the rowdiest and most rebellious students in the school. She loved to steal cars and run police roadblocks.

Laura was a sixteen-year-old whose parents had died when she was eleven. Laura lived with her aunt and uncle whom she constantly argued with and failed to obey. She would climb out her bedroom window at night and go to drug parties.

Both Laura and Terry went to school together. They decided to steal a car and drive to Los Angeles where they planned to become hookers until they made it as models. They were picked up by the Las Vegas police.

Leslie was a cute fourteen-year-old girl who was adopted at age twelve, was noncompliant to parental authority, ran away from home often, rifled lockers at school, and sluffed school frequently. Later we were to find out that between the age of five and nine she was locked in the basement of the people who cared for her, except when she was in school. She ate raw meat; and Leslie had been physically and sexually abused. Leslie was once placed in a crisis home where the woman said, "Leslie is the worst girl I have had to deal with in twenty years."

The rules and guidelines for this program were laid out:
1. The best interest of the girls should be the motivating agent for all things done in the program.
2. The girls would not be allowed to skip school, use drugs, drink, smoke.
3. While the main focus was to give positive support to positive actions of the girls, corporal punishment was a course of action the girls were told would be used if needed. (At the end of the project even the girls agreed that this was a key ingredient to the success of the program.)
4. The system was based on the principle of a presiding structure where the girls' parents and the supporting staff had final say as to the rules of the program. This system strongly encouraged the girls to provide input as to what they felt should and should not be the rules. In many cases the staff and parents simply adopted the rules suggested by the girls during weekly planning meetings.

During the course of the project the girls went to local public schools but were closely watched so they could not run away. If they sluffed classes, they were required to stay home and be taught by the school's visiting teachers. If they smoked, drank, or took drugs, restrictions to the home were instituted. Over half the punishments given the girls for misbehaving were in fact proposed by the other girls in the program. The program strongly emphasized getting the girls to help each other, and stopping those actions which would surely ruin the girls' chances later in life.

What happened to the girls? Within four months Carrie, Ann, and Wendy, who all were straight F students at home, were on the honor roll. Sheri was above a C average (remember, prior she was straight F's). Terry received three B's, a C and a D; her best grades ever. And Leslie had a better attendance and citizenship rating at school than she had ever had. All were going to school, staying off drugs
All five sets of parents now report significantly better relationships with their daughters. Carrie and Sheri went home last May. Both wanted to go to summer school to make up credits they were lacking. Both were on the honor roll last term in school. Neither run around with their old friends, and both enjoy family activities. Their parents are totally elated on getting their two daughters back into a positive family fold.

Ann who had straight F's, was promiscuous, and on drugs is now home with her parents and has been doing well for the past six months. Fights between her and her parents do not occur. She went to her Bishop and straightened out her past mistakes. She is on the honor roll.

Wendy is on the honor roll at school. She is not home, but remains here by choice. She says she knows she could not make it back home in California and wants to stay here until next June. She is pretty much on her own and does what she wants. She (like four of the other girls) says she sees life much differently now. She feels better about herself and wants to succeed in life.

Laura and Terry who stole the car to become prostitutes are now living where they want. By choice Terry stays with a firm family who helps her with her schoolwork. She goes home on weekends and whenever else she feels like it. Laura, having no parents, now lives with her grandmother, is doing very well in school, is on the track team, and set five high school track records last year. All seven of these girls now hold a love for those of us who worked with them. They all call or write, and we all get together once in a while.

I would like to have more positive things to say about Leslie. In our program she did better than she had ever done before. The years of physical and sexual abuse, along with neglect at times certainly took their toll on her. Because of the extent of her unusually harsh childhood years, we consider even the progress we made with her a success.

In terms of how we, the parents, and the girls view what happened, there is no question the project was a smashing success. We helped seven lost girls find themselves and their proper place in their family and society. We used a system which included the possibility of corporal punishment. Both psychological research and scriptural passages imply such a program will work; and it did.

It is my personal belief that there are many concerned parents out there who are being led astray with bad parenting advice. They are told, as I have previously quoted, that punishment is ineffective and primitive. They are told there are better ways. It is true more positive, nonpunitive approaches have been implemented in social programs for years in this country. And how well have they done?

Fewer teenagers are being picked up for truancy these days. The reason, however, is not because fewer teenagers are skipping school. Perhaps it is more because in almost all states teenagers over fourteen or sixteen years of age are no longer forced by the law to go to school. These youngsters can decide whether they go to school or not because going to school at that age is now considered a privilege, not a requirement. It doesn’t take much imagination as to what the future of the teenagers is who “decide” not to take school seriously.

Now I seem to be digressing and generalizing a bit here. I frankly don’t consider corporal punishment to be the savior of the teenage world. But I do believe that as child-rearing professionals we have been telling parents that some sort of positive understanding approach without the need for firmness (which may include corporal punishment) will work. We have been strongly suggesting to parents that punishing children is a moral sin and almost totally psychologically destructive to a child. Obviously such is not the case.

Now I am NOT suggesting that parents go home and beat the tar out of their children because it is automatically good for them. However, I am suggesting that indications are that punishment (including spankings) can have positive effects in many situations. I am suggesting we keep an open mind, do more research, and get a better understanding of the punishment process. I am suggesting society’s current trend toward totally banishing corporal punishment in parenting is not only unrealistic, but harmful. By parents failing to be firm when they should be, we are losing a thousand times more teenagers than we do from parents misusing punishment.

I frankly believe that most misuse of punishment by parents is actually caused by child-rearing professionals’ denial that punishment works. We tell parents it doesn’t work . . . and that is that. Parents often run into situations where punishment is necessary yet they have no guidelines as to how to do it properly. You see there are times, as the scriptures say, when strong discipline is needed. Yet most contemporary child-rearing philosophies say you can always get your child to agree without resorting to physical coercion. For example, a most popular discipline approach claims you deal with parent-child conflicts in seven basic steps: (1) make friends and express concern, (2) focus on the present problem, (3) get child to make a value judgment about what he/she is doing, (4) get child to agree what he is doing is wrong and develop a plan “with him to change,” (5) get a commitment to change, (6) if plan fails don’t accept excuses, and (7) don’t punish if plan does not work, but go back to step 4 which focuses on getting the child to agree with you (Glasser, 1965).

I wonder why Brian’s parents or the parents of our six girls never thought of these steps when they were having troubles with them. Obviously there are times children want things they should not have or do things they should not do. And in these situations talking is often not enough.

So parents try punishing without good guidelines, because they have been told it doesn’t work anyway. No wonder parents misuse punishment.

Tips for Proper Punishment

Let me share with you quickly some tips for proper punishment. As you are aware by now, I have been arguing that we professionals need to expand our research in the field of punishment. There is a great deal more we could know. But let me list some of the Do’s and Don’ts that seem to be true to use punishment effectively:
1. Do not demean a child when using punishment. Focus on the actions of the child, not her integrity or self-worth.
2. Do not hold grudges for a child’s misbehavior. If misbehavior occurs punish it, then forget it. Do not repeatedly remind a child of past misdeeds.
3. Provide alternative ways of acting for the child that can result in positive payoffs. One of the most well known principles of punishment is that punishment does effectively decrease misbehavior WHEN a child has alternative ways of acting available that pay off.
4. Use one part punishment to nine parts positive attention and reward. Keep a daily record of how often you reprimand your child versus the number of times you positively interact and reward your child. If your reprimands equal the number of positives you give your child, you are punishing too much. Something is wrong. Start focusing more on the positive things your child does. Instead of always catching your child being bad, spend more time “catching your child being good.”
5. Don’t talk it out with your child just before you punish him. Apply the punishment; get it over with, and discuss it a few hours later, after the effect of the punishment has time to settle in.
6. Keep in mind punishment can take many forms. While spankings can work, so can having a child sit on a chair, going to his room, taking away privileges, or taking back allowance money (a form of what we call Response Cost). Children can differ in what is punishing to them. For one child a spanking may work, for another sitting on a chair is much more unpleasant.
7. Punish as soon as possible. Do not put it off. Delay dilutes the effectiveness of punishment.

Another source of additional tips which maximize the effects of punishment is Azrin & Holz (1966).

In Summation

In conclusion let me summarize, or perhaps point out more clearly the purpose of this talk. I believe that for several decades many falsehoods have been propagated in the area of parenting. Telling parents there is a better way without using punishment has not worked. Teachers are frustrated in schools and now demanding some effective disciplinary approaches. The past approaches of just trying to talk it out without using firmness is failing with police forces and school districts being forced to try to ignore the problem rather than deal with it. I daily run into parents who claim they cannot get the school staffs or police to help them in trying to be firm with their child. School staff and the police are repeatedly restricted from using punitive methods because, “They are ineffective and should not be used.”

The almost universal response by all in our society is throw up our hands, give up on trying to effectively discipline teenagers, and turn the responsibility over to them and say, “Well, it’s your decision whether you go to school, get married, use drugs, be noncompliant to parental authority, or be promiscuous.”

Who out there really believes that fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen-year-olds will be better off with less discipline because they tend to rebel to discipline.

I believe well-intentioned parents find few things more difficult than trying to be firm with their child when it is needed. It is not only the right, but the responsibility, of not only parents but society to be firm at times with children. It is too easy a quick fix to say, “Well, it is up to you, child; it is not my responsibility.” Such fixes cost us in future years.

It is the responsibility of parents to discipline, and it is the responsibility of child-rearing professionals and society to support these parental responsibilities. Child-rearing professionals are obligated to conduct research with an open mind and provide honest and effective disciplinary alternatives that can be given to parents. I believe effective disciplinary methods are out there. I believe corporal punishment is and can be a natural “part,” and I emphasize part, of life’s disciplinary system. I challenge you, college students and professionals listening to this talk, to commit yourself and not take anyone’s thoughts on this issue (including mine), but to search out what has been done; and resolve to help in furthering our knowledge of such important issues. There are so many Brians and Carries, and Wondy’s and Lauries out there needing our help. Let’s help them.

REFERENCES


Concluded on page 25
Continued from page 15


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


