

## Disciplining Your Child

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The word discipline, which comes from the root word disciplinare - to teach or instruct – refers to the system of teaching and nurturing that prepares children to achieve competence, self-control, self-direction, and caring for others. An effective discipline strategy has three essential components:

- A positive, supportive, loving relationship between the parent (or parents) and child.
- Use of positive reinforcement strategies to increase desired behaviors (proactive).
- Removing reinforcement or creating consequences to reduce or eliminate undesired behaviors (reactive).

All three components must be functioning well for discipline to be successful. They must also occur in the context of a relationship in which children feel secure. Children learn the best from people they care enough to want to emulate and please, and who are good role models.

The American Academy of Family Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics as well as experts in child development and successful living, strongly discourage the use of corporal punishment, or spanking, because it has negative consequences. It is no more effective than other approaches for dealing with undesired behavior in children but it does create other problems for the child. One profound negative consequence is that it models aggressive behavior as a solution to conflict. We strongly recommend that parents develop alternatives to spanking, such as “time outs” and removal of privileges.

Strategies for parents and other caregivers that help children learn positive behaviors include the following:

- Providing regular positive attention, sometimes called special time (opportunities to communicate positively with parents are important for children of all ages).
- Listening carefully to children and helping them learn to use words to express their feelings.
- Providing children with opportunities to make choices whenever appropriate options exist and then helping them to learn to evaluate the potential consequences of their choice.
- Reinforcing emerging desirable behaviors with frequent praise and ignoring trivial misdeeds.
- Modeling orderly, predictable behavior, respectful communication and collaborative conflict resolution strategies.

We know that each parent's beliefs about discipline were formed in childhood under emotional circumstances. We know that a lot of adults were spanked when they were children and thus it seems like an acceptable option. We also know it is very difficult to ask for help when as a parent, we are having problems with our own ways of discipline especially if we feel guilty even over one incident where we found ourselves out of control. Please know we are here to help in a non-judgmental, supportive way. We are busy and challenged parents too, but we have training and resources that we know can help. And, in helping you, we help ourselves and make this world a kinder, gentler and safer place for all of us, especially our children.

## THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SPANKING

Spanking is a less effective strategy than time-out or removal of privileges for reducing undesired behavior in children. Although spanking may immediately reduce or stop an undesired behavior, **its effectiveness decreases with subsequent use.** The only way to maintain the initial effect of spanking is to systematically increase the intensity with which it is delivered, which can quickly escalate into abuse.

Spanking children less than 18 months of age increases the chance of physical injury, and the child is unlikely to understand the connection between the behavior and the punishment.

Although spanking may result in a reaction of shock by the child and cessation of the undesired behavior, repeated **spanking may cause agitated, aggressive behavior** in the child that may lead to physical altercation between parent and child.

Spanking models aggressive behavior as a solution to conflict and has been associated with **increased aggression in preschool and school children.**

Spanking and threats of spanking lead to altered parent-child relationships, making discipline substantially more difficult when physical punishment is no longer an option, such as with adolescents.

Spanking is no more effective as a long-term strategy than other approaches, and reliance on spanking as a discipline approach makes other discipline strategies less effective to use. Time-out and positive reinforcement of other behaviors are more difficult to implement and take longer to become effective when spanking has previously been a primary method of discipline.

A pattern of spanking may be sustained or increased. Because the spanking may provide the parent some relief from anger, the likelihood that the parent will spank the child in the future is increased.

Parents are more likely to use aversive techniques of discipline, like spanking when they are angry, fatigued, and stressed. In survey of parents, **spanking was used because the parent had lost it** greater than 50% of the time. Approximately 85% of parents expressed moderate to high anger, remorse and agitation while punishing their children. These findings challenge the notion that parents can spank in a calm, planned manner. **It is best not to administer any punishments while in a state of anger**, especially when the recipient is smaller than you are.

Parents who have relied on spanking do not seem to shift strategies when the risks of detrimental effects increase with developmental age. More than half of 13 to 14 year-olds are still being hit an average of eight times per year.

Spanking of preschool boys by fathers with whom the child identified only resulted in increased aggressive behavior by those children.

Children rate spanking as causing some to much pain and generally experience anger at the adult as a result, **causing loss of respect or trust and a breakdown in the parent-child relationship.**

**The more children are hit**, the more anger they report as adults, **the more they hit** their own children when they are parents, the more likely they are to approve of hitting and to actually hit their spouses, and the greater their marital conflict.

1 out of 4 teenage girls will be involved in an abusive relationship in their teens and early twenties. This is across all socioeconomic classes. This is because the girls and their boyfriends are witnessing hitting in their own homes and they accept this as somehow normal. Unfortunately, some of these girls end up dead.

Although many parents justify spanking, 85% say that they would rather not if they had an alternative in which they believed. One study found that 54% of mothers said that spanking was the wrong thing to have done in at least half of the times they used it. This ambivalence likely results in **inconsistent use, which limits further its effectiveness as a teaching tool.**

Even controlling for baseline pre-existing antisocial behavior, the more 3 to 6 year old children were hit, the worse their behavior when assessed 2 years later.

Actions causing pain such as spanking can acquire a positive value rather than the intended adversative value. Children who expect pain may actually seek it through escalating misbehaviors, especially when the parent isn't giving the child enough attention in other positive ways.



Parents who spank are more likely to use other forms of corporal punishment and a greater variety of verbal and other punitive methods. When punishment fails, parents who rely on it tend to increase the intensity of its use rather than to more appropriately change to more creative successful strategies.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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