

Back to the Family

By Dr. Ray Guarendi

A project by Children's Hospital of Akron, Ohio headed by clinical psychologist, Ray Guarendi, sought to discover the secrets of highly successful families who reared outstanding children.ⁱ The 50 state winners of the teacher-of-the-year award were asked to name the most outstanding children they had taught over the course of their career. The teachers were not to select the highest academic achievers, but the students who exhibited the greatest self-motivation, consideration for others, morality and general strength of character. These students' families were thoroughly studied and spanking was among the many aspects of parenting examined. The study's findings included:

- 70% of the parents of outstanding students employed some physical punishment with their children. Some relied upon it often and others rarely used it. "Spanking was generally considered to be one tool in a parent's discipline repertoire."
- Most began spanking between 18-24 months and phased it out by ages 4-6 years.
- Spanking was neither the main method nor a last-ditch intervention.
- The occasions when spanking was used:
 1. When teaching a child to avoid potentially dangerous situations.
 2. When punishing for deliberate disobedience.
 3. When punishing for disrespectful behavior.
- Spanking was not used for accidents, childish behavior, or impulsiveness; the parents preferred to employ other consequences for these behaviors.

The study's conclusions about spanking:

1. A majority of parents with outstanding children are willing to spank. They consider it a healthy discipline option.
2. Spanking is not child abuse. Not one of these spanking parents was a child abuser.
3. Spanking does not in and of itself lead a child to be aggressive or to approach problems with a "might-makes-right" mentality. Consistently, the youngsters in these families were identified as normally mature and sensitive.
4. One need not spank to be a good parent. A significant minority of parents chose not to spank for personal and practical reasons. They neither viewed spanking as the psychological dark side of discipline nor as an outmoded or brutal technique.

i Guarendi R. Back to the Family. 1990;215-222. New York: Simon & Schuster.