

The Great Spanking Debate

Despite all the warnings and criticism, four out of five parents still spank their kids. Many experts believe the negative consequences outweigh any behavior benefits. Who's right?

By Jeannette Moninger from [Parents Magazine](#)



Lewis Goldberg admits his 5-year-old son, Nathan, is strong-willed and difficult to discipline. "When he acts up, it sometimes takes every ounce of self-control I have not to spank him," says the Short Hills, New Jersey, dad. "But my wife and I agree: You can't tell your child not to hit others and then raise your own hand to him."

Spanking has probably crossed your mind at some point. Maybe your child is ignoring the rules or talking back. Time-outs aren't working, and neither is any other consequence you've tried. Suddenly, you start to wonder, "Is a swat on the bottom so bad?"

That depends on whom you ask. Finding spanking supporters isn't as challenging as you might think. Of the 1,000 readers polled on [parents.com](#), 81 percent said they had spanked their child at least once, and 22 percent do so once a week or more. That figure is consistent with a 2007 study published in the journal *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, which found that nearly 80 percent of kids are spanked at least once by fifth grade.

Spanking -- the act of striking a child's buttocks with an open hand -- is a form of corporal punishment, a catchall term that includes hitting with a belt, paddling with an object (such as a stick or a large wooden spoon) and slapping with an open hand on the face. Most child-development experts include acts such as tapping a toddler's diaper-cushioned bottom when he misbehaves and smacking the hand of a kid protectively as he reaches for a hot stove in the same category.

Since all of these punishments entail hitting, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) urges parents not to resort to them under any circumstance. "There's no reason to get physical with a child when other discipline tactics are more effective," says Benjamin Siegel, M.D., chair of the AAP's Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. The committee's position is that spanking often evolves into abuse, which endangers a child's safety and can cause psychological damage, leading to aggressive behavior, substance problems, and acts of delinquency during adolescence. It recommends alternative tactics, such as verbal reprimands (though not yelling), taking away privileges, and giving time-outs to [deal](#) with the misbehavior. Clearly, though, a lot of parents aren't getting the message or have decided they know what method is best for them -- and their kids.

A Family Tradition

The "terrible twos" and "trying threes" tend to test a parent's resolve more than any other phase, so it makes sense that kids in these age groups are the most likely to be spanked. Nearly one third of parents of [preschoolers](#) have no qualms about using corporal punishment as a means to correct bad behavior, according to an April 2010 national poll conducted by the University of Michigan's C. S. Mott Children's Hospital.

Even First Ladies aren't above delivering a swift swat now and again. In a *USA Weekend* interview last spring, First Lady Michelle Obama admitted to spanking her daughter Malia once or twice when she was little but said it was "completely ineffective." Laura Bush told Dr. Phil she did the same to her twin daughters, Barbara and Jenna, when they were young.

Research shows that the likelihood of being a spanker depends in part on where a parent lives. "If the community supports physical discipline as a whole, parents may be more likely to do it," says Matthew Davis, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan Health System, in Ann Arbor. In the United States, families in the South and West view it more favorably than their counterparts in the Northeast and Midwest, according to the C. S. Mott Children's Hospital poll. And one 2007 study published in *Family Relations* found that African-American parents are 9 percent more likely to spank their children than white parents are. "Discipline methods often are passed down from generation to generation and rooted in strong cultural and familial traditions," adds Dr. Davis.

Put simply, spankers tend to breed spankers. Women who were punished physically during childhood are nearly 50 percent more likely to discipline their kids the same way, according to a 2009 Ohio State University study.

A common refrain among parents who spank is, "My folks did it to me, and I turned out fine." Las Vegas mom Florence Cervantes says the swats she sustained as a kid taught her to accept responsibility for her actions, and she's instilling the same lesson in her five kids, ages 1 to 13. "Being spanked as a young child shaped me into the respectful person I am today," she says. "It's one way I teach my older kids to respect authority and to take responsibility for their actions, just as I learned it."

A child's sex also seems to play a role. Boys, who are stereotypically more rambunctious than girls, tend to be spanked more often. "Studies suggest parents feel boys need more physical punishment because their behaviors are perceived as being more aggressive or because moms and dads want to 'toughen them up,'" says spanking researcher Elizabeth Gershoff, Ph.D., a child-development professor at The University of Texas at Austin. Indeed, "aggressive" behavior -- anything from grabbing a toy out of another child's hand to pulling the dog's tail to biting a sibling -- is the top reason parents spank, numerous studies show.

The Truth About Hitting



While many pro-spanking parents cling to the effectiveness of the method, a spate of evidence suggests that striking a child often backfires, making him more, not less, unruly. In a 2010 *Pediatrics* study, 3-year-olds who were spanked more than twice a month were 50 percent more likely to exhibit hostile tendencies by age 5. And the

potential downside for a child is severe. In her 2002 review of 88 spanking studies, Dr. Gershoff found that kids who are spanked have a significantly higher risk for aggression, depression, and relationship problems both as children and, later, as adults.

"We're constantly discovering new risks associated with the act of spanking -- like increased anxiety and a number of other mental-health problems -- which makes the 'It worked for me' argument outdated," says Catherine Taylor, Ph.D., assistant professor of global community health and behavioral sciences at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, in New Orleans. She points out that in the past kids breathed their parents' secondary cigarette smoke, rode in cars without seat belts, and lived in homes with lead-based paint. "Research has since shown these things to be unhealthy for children, and spanking is no different," she says.

However, not everyone agrees with Dr. Taylor's spanking analysis. One [camp](#) of experts argues that an openhanded swat to the buttocks is harmless -- and, in fact, can be helpful. Den A. Trumbull, M.D., president of the American College of Pediatricians (which split from the AAP in 2002 over various policy differences) believes spanking is a proven way to reinforce milder disciplinary tactics. He cites a 2005 review of 26 spanking studies published in *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*. The researchers concluded that spanking disobedient 2- to 6-year-olds worked just as well at reforming their behavior as 13 alternative disciplinary approaches (such as giving a time-out, reasoning with a child, and taking away privileges) as long as the parent lovingly and rationally explained the reasons for the action. Only when the corporal punishment was severe (such as striking the face) or when it was the family's sole discipline method was it deemed harmful compared with other methods.

"Some kids are difficult to parent. At times, they simply won't stay in a time-out and they can't be reasoned with," says Robert Larzelere, Ph.D., author of the *Clinical Child* review study and professor of human development and family science at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. That's where conditional spankings -- those that are intended to back up these milder disciplinary tactics -- come into play. Drs. Larzelere and Trumbull contend that many older defiant kids learn to cooperate with time-outs and reasoning so they won't require corporal punishment anymore. "They will have learned through spankings to take parental warnings more seriously and to respond appropriately to the milder method," Dr. Trumbull says.

No Consensus

The studies cited by both spanking supporters and detractors are hardly infallible. For starters, you can't study physical punishment in the randomized, double-blind way you can with, say, drug trials. The findings can merely point to an association between spanking and negative (or positive) outcomes rather than a clearly defined cause and effect. So it comes down to a chicken-and-egg problem of sorts: Are kids spanked because they misbehave, or do they misbehave more because they're spanked?

There's also the issue of intent. "A parent who spanks as a form of discipline is quite different from one who strikes with the goal of injuring a child," argues Dr. Trumbull. "Clearly, the long-term effects will be vastly different in these two instances." For this reason, he contends, studies that lump openhanded spanking with potentially abusive methods, like kicking, face-slapping, or paddling with painful objects, are misleading.

But detractors say what happens behind closed doors isn't necessarily so benevolent. Parents tend to resort to spanking when they're angry, stressed, or tired, which makes carrying it out in a calm, controlled manner far more challenging. An estimated two thirds of child-abuse cases start off as disciplinary acts and then degrade into something far more menacing. In a survey published in *Pediatrics* and cited frequently by the AAP, half of the respondents who admitted to spanking their kids said they did so because they "lost it." And approximately one in four parents reported that they use an

object -- a hairbrush, a wooden spoon, a belt -- to paddle their kids, an escalation of force that has been shown to raise the risk of child abuse nearly ninefold, according to a 2008 *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* study.

Despite these risks, many parents have no intention of abandoning corporal punishment -- a fact that concerns the AAP. "It's very hard to make a violent act loving," says Dr. Siegel. "Although it's true that a lot of spanked kids will never develop serious problems, why would you take the risk? There are healthier ways to raise a well-behaved child."

No-Spank Strategies

If you use your hands to punish because nothing else seems to work, try one of these alternatives -- and stick with it for at least 21 days, suggests Parents advisor Michele Borba, Ed.D.

Positive Reinforcement

Best for: Ages 1 and up

Make it work: By praising your child when he's being good, you may need to punish him less. Let him know exactly what he did right ("You did a great job of using your words to express anger, not your fists") so he knows what to do in the future.

Ignoring the Behavior

Best for: Ages 2 and up

Make it work: When your child is whining or having a tantrum, pretend you can't hear her. The attention-seeking behavior may escalate before it subsides, but hold your ground. If you don't respond to it, she'll eventually stop.

Time-Outs

Best for: Ages 3 to 7

Make it work: Follow the one-minute-per-year guideline (i.e., a 3-year-old should get a three-minute time-out). When it's over, calmly talk about what your child did wrong and how he might fix the problem or avoid it next time.

Logical Consequences

Best for: Ages 4 and up

Make it work: Help your child connect his misbehavior to a negative outcome. For instance, a 4-year-old who spills milk on the floor must clean it up, and a 6-year-old who pedals her bike into the street might lose her riding privileges for a week.

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