BEATING THE DEVIL OUT OF THEM

Corporal Punishment in American Families and its Effects on Children

Murray A. Straus with Denise A. Donnelly

This file Contains:
Table of Context
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
BEATING THE DEVIL OUT OF THEM

Corporal Punishment in American Families and its Effects on Children

Murray A. Straus
with Denise A. Donnelly

With a new introduction by the author

Transaction Publishers
New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.)

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. All inquiries should be addressed to Transaction Publishers, Rutgers—The State University, 35 Berry Circle, Piscataway, New Jersey 08854-8042.

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 00-059930
ISBN: 0-7658-0754-8
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Straus, Murray A. (Murray Arnold). 1926-
Beating the devil out of them: corporal punishment in American families and its effects on children / Murray A. Straus with Denise A. Donnelly ; with a new introduction by the author.—2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

HQ770.4 .S77 2001
306.874—dc21 00-059930


Contents

Introduction to the Transaction Edition i
Preface xvii
Acknowledgments xxiii

PART I
SPANKING—THE VIRTUOUS VIOLENCE

1 The Conspiracy of Silence 3
What Is Corporal Punishment? 4
The Importance of Corporal Punishment 9
A Conspiracy of Silence 10
Child-Rearing Advice Books 14
Plan of the Book 16

2 Everyone Does It, But Less Now 19
The Virtuous Violence 19
Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment 20
How Much Corporal Punishment? 22
Corporal Punishment In Two Nationally Representative Samples 22
Trends 25
Differences Between Boys and Girls 29
Cultural Discontinuity in Corporal Punishment 31
Conclusions 32

3 Hitting Adolescents 35
Two Measures of Corporal Punishment 36
How Many Are Hit and How Often? 37
The Social Context of Hitting Adolescents 39
Conclusions 47
PART III
THE FUTURE

10 Ten Myths That Perpetuate Corporal Punishment 149
Myth 1: Spanking Works Better 149
Myth 2: Spanking Is Needed as a Last Resort 152
Myth 3: Spanking Is Harmless 152
Myth 4: One or Two Times Won't Cause Any Damage 155
Myth 5: Parents Can't Stop Without Help 155
Myth 6: If You Don't Spank, Your Children Will Be Spoiled or Run Wild 157
Myth 7: Parents Spank Rarely or Only for Serious Problems 160
Myth 8: By the Time a Child Is a Teenager, Parents Have Stopped 160
Myth 9: If Parents Don't Spank, They Will Verbally Abuse Their Child 161
Myth 10: It Is Unrealistic to Expect Parents to Never Spank 161
Why Do These Myths Persist? 162

11 Social Evolution and Corporal Punishment 165
How Solid is the Evidence? 166
Corporal Punishment in Historical Perspective 174
A Moral Passage 175
Social Changes Underlying the Moral Passage 178
Lessons from the Swedish No-Spanking Law 184
Obstacles to Ending Corporal Punishment 186
A Society Without Corporal Punishment 190

12 The Benefits of Never Spanking: New and More Definitive Evidence 193
The Chicken and Egg Problem with Previous Research on Corporal Punishment 194
Five New Landmark Studies 196
Is There a Backlash? 205
Most Parent Education Inadvertently
Perpetuates Corporal Punishment 208
Benefits to Children and Society of
Ending Corporal Punishment 212

Appendix
A. A Theoretical Model 217
B. Samples and Measures of Corporal Punishment 227
C. Statistical Methods and Measures 245

Note: 283
References 287
Index 305

Research on computers began to leap forward significantly in 1994. The
existence of five long-standing conclusive evidence of the harmful side effects
that had been noted over 45 years. Computers were seen as a dangerous
book without informing the public of the knowledge about computers up to date by
research.

Another major change was the addition of a new chapter 11. The old conclusion
was revised to a definitive conclusion: Corporal punishment caused the behavior
cumulated evidence and doubt about the accuracy.

The third major difference was the change in title. When I planned the
chapter, the original title was “Corporal Punishment and Children.” But I soon realized
that the title was too narrow. I made the change to “Corporal Punishment in A...
The main purpose of this chapter is to put corporal punishment in a broad historical and cross-cultural framework in order to uncover clues to the socio-historical changes that may underlie the reduction in corporal punishment that has already taken place and clues to what might happen in the future. But before doing that, it is time to take an overview of the evidence on the prevalence and side effects of corporal punishment. The evidence shows that:

- Almost all American parents hit toddlers—usually repeatedly. This is almost unchanged from a generation ago.

- More than a third continue into the early teen years. This is about half as many as a generation ago.

- The more corporal punishment a person experienced the more likely they are later in childhood to:
  - Hit other children
  - Act out aggressively in other ways, such as hitting their parents (see Chapter 12)
  - Experience less rapid cognitive development (see Chapter 12)
and as an adult to:

- Be depressed or suicidal
- Physically abuse their child or spouse
- Engage in other violent crime
- Have a drinking problem (Straus and Kaufman Kantor, 1994)
- Be attracted to masochistic sex
- Be less likely to achieve a high occupation and income

How Solid is the Evidence?

Many people are likely to think that these conclusions are ridiculous, and people with scientific training will quickly point out a number of reasons for doubting their validity. I will identify some of the key questions about validity and also identify reasons for taking the findings in Part II seriously.

*Cross-Sectional Data Does Not Provide Evidence of Cause and Effect.*

The most important reason for doubting that the studies in Part II demonstrate that corporal punishment causes social and psychological problems is that all those studies used what researchers call a “cross-sectional” research design (also called a “correlational” study). This is a particularly severe problem in studies of corporal punishment because it can be assumed that parents hit children to correct undesirable behavior. Thus, the spankings may have been a response to the child’s behavioral problems rather than a cause.

At the time the original version of this chapter was written all I could do was alert readers to this problem and point out two reasons for taking the results of those cross-sectional studies seriously. First, I argued that some of the chapters reported studies of hypothesized side effects that are unlikely to be the cause of hitting by parents; specifically, depression and masochistic sex. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that these problems caused the par-
ents to use corporal punishment because depression and masochistic sex do not usually become obvious until adulthood.

Second, although the cross-sectional evidence in Part II cannot prove that corporal punishment causes the behavior problems studied, those studies could have shown that there is no relation between corporal punishment and social and psychological problems. Each of the studies described in Part II provided an opportunity to refute the theory that corporal punishment is harmful, yet that did not occur.

As pointed out in the new preface, the situation has changed dramatically since the first edition. There are now five "longitudinal" studies (also called "prospective" studies). Prospective studies provide a much more solid basis for inferring that corporal punishment does harm children because they can take into account the misbehavior that led the parents to use corporal punishment. These studies found that the more corporal punishment parents used, the more likely it was, a year or more later, the child would:

- Engage in antisocial behavior
- Hit a parent
- Hit a dating partner
- Fall behind in cognitive development relative to other children

Each of these studies is described in the new postscript chapter. Although the new longitudinal studies are a great improvement, the cross-sectional studies in Part II remain important because they cover issues that have not yet been addressed by longitudinal research. Consequently, it remains necessary to consider their limitations and why those studies are nonetheless important.

Recall Data By Adults

Most of the evidence in Part II is based on recall of corporal punishment by adults and refers to corporal punishment as an adolescent. It is possible that the links between corporal punishment and problem behaviors are an artifact of a tendency for people who experienced these behavior problems to be more likely to recall having been hit by their parents. However, the fact that over
90 percent of adults recall corporal punishment (Bryan and Freed, 1982; Graziano and Namaste, 1990), including almost two out of three who recalled being hit as an adolescent (see Chapter 3) makes this unlikely. Moreover, the fact that corporal punishment as an adolescent was the typical experience of Americans of that generation makes the findings broadly applicable to that generation.

**Inadequate Controls For Other Variables**

The real cause of the link between corporal punishment and child behavior problems might be other family and parent characteristics that lead to both corporal punishment and child behavior problems. For example, parents who physically attack each other are more likely to also hit their children. To deal with this problem, the studies in Part II and other cross-sectional studies controlled for many variables that could be the “real cause” of the problems linked to corporal punishment, including:

**Social Characteristics of the Parents and Family**

- Educational level of parents
- Income, including very low income
- Racial/ethnic group
- Single parent versus two parent families
- Number of children in the family
- Sex of the parent
- Age of the parent

**Parental Role Behaviors**

- Adequacy of parent’s supervision of children
- Parental warmth and support
- Whether parents established clear rules and expectations
- Use of other disciplinary strategies such as time out
- Parental consistency in discipline
- Parental use of reasoning
- Parental involvement and cognitive stimulation
Child Characteristics
Child’s birth-weight
Sex of the child
Age of the child
Child’s delinquency or antisocial behavior at Time 1
Child’s cognitive ability at Time 1
Child-to-parent bond

Psycho-social Problems
Conflict between the parents
Violence between the parents
Violence in family in which the parents grew up
Parental alcohol abuse
Parent attitudes approving violence
Whether the parent also engaged in more severe violence ("physical abuse")
Depression of parents

No single study controlled for all of these alternative explanations. However, it is a well-recognized scientific principle (sometimes called "triangulation" [Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest, and Belew Grove, 1981]) that valid conclusions are possible on the basis of evidence from studies which, taken one by one, are not definitive. This is because the weak point of one study may be dealt with in another study. I think we have reached the point of triangulation concerning corporal punishment. There have been more than 80 studies examining the effects of corporal punishment, and with rare exception, they have found harmful long-term effects (Thompson, in press).

Overlap of Corporal Punishment and Physical Abuse
Corporal punishment and physical abuse overlap because almost every parent who kicks or punches a child also engages in legal forms of hitting children such as spanking and slapping. Consequently, what shows up as an effect of corporal punishment might
really be due to unknowingly including children in the sample who were physically abused. However, there are studies in Part II that avoided that problem by removing physically abused children from the sample (Chapter 7, Chart 7-5; Chapter 8; also MacMillan, Boyle, Wong, Daku, Fleming, and Walsh, 1999; Straus and Yodanis, 1996; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop, 1991). These studies, which did not include parents who exceeded ordinary corporal punishment, nonetheless found harmful side effects for corporal punishment.

*Never Spanked Children Were Not Studied*

Most of the research which shows a link between corporal punishment and aggression was carried out by comparing children whose parents hit them frequently and those whose parents hit less often. It can be argued that this shows that it is frequent hitting of children that gives rise to later aggressiveness. This is consistent with the belief that “moderate corporal punishment,” i.e., hitting a child only once in a while, is harmless. The studies in Part II which compare those who reported never having been hit with those hit just once, twice, etc are based on recall by adults, and few if any adults can remember what happened at ages 2 and 3, the ages when spanking is most likely to have occurred. So, not having been hit as an adolescent does not mean never having been hit by parents.

Fortunately, three studies described in the postscript chapter avoid this memory problem because the corporal punishment data were obtained by asking mothers about spanking in the past week. That does not entirely solve the problem because mothers who did not spank in the past week might have spanked in some previous week. However, interviews with mothers in a study of a thousand children identified 189 who, at least according to the mothers, had never been spanked (Straus and Mouradian, 1998). These children had the lowest average antisocial behavior scores and were the least impulsive, even compared to children who were very rarely spanked (only once in the past six months).

*If All Parents Spank, There Is No Way to Prove That Spanking Is Harmful*

This is a valid statistical principle, but it does not apply to corporal punishment because, the phrases “almost all parents” and “al-
most universal” are not the same as “all.” With a large enough sample, even the 6 percent who did not spank provides enough cases to determine if it makes a difference. As indicated in the previous paragraph, we found that never-spanked children are, on average, the best behaved. This finding, of course, contradicts “common sense” and the belief that never-spanked children will be “kids running wild.” That reasoning and those beliefs have no basis in logic or science. The logical problem is a classic false dichotomy. It assumes that no-spanking means “permissiveness” in the sense of no rules and no-discipline. As for kids running wild, that is an American cultural myth, akin to the pro-natalist myth that only-children will be spoiled brats. The available scientific evidence is the opposite for both spanking and only-children. Of course, one can cite cases of children running wild, but that is also true of children whose parents use CP. Conversely, I know a family in which one spanking forever clouded the relationship between the mother and her daughter. However, such cases are rare, and I know of many more in which repeated spankings did not adversely affect the relationship between parents and children. But that does not make spanking not harmful, just as the fact that two-thirds of heavy smokers will not die from a smoking related disease does not make smoking not harmful.

What about just one spank? The Straus and Mouradian study and other evidence suggest that even a single spanking carries a risk of harmful side effects, although only a small risk. As a society, spanking is so taken for granted that we forget it is a euphemism for hitting. The degree to which our judgment about the harmful side effects of a single instance is based on cultural norms permitting and expecting that parents will hit children for repeated misbehavior can perhaps be seen better if we think of a husband slapping his wife “just once.” The risk of harmful psychological effects from a single incident may be low for both errant children and errant wives, but our culture makes us perceive it as zero for children and high for wives.

Conclusion

The first Surgeon General’s report on smoking had to rely on studies that, individually, were not definitive. Although none of the many studies they reviewed were definitive, the defects of one study were not applicable to other studies, which in turn had still
other defects, but also other strong points. The triangulation of findings from different studies led to the conclusion that smoking does increase the risk of lung cancer, even though no single study was definitive.

The amount of research on corporal punishment is not nearly as large as the research on which the Surgeon General's report on smoking was based. However, the accumulated evidence, and especially the new longitudinal studies summarized in the postscript chapter, supports the conclusion that corporal punishment increases the risk of a wide variety of social and psychological problems. These studies consistently show that corporal punishment is associated with an increased risk of social and psychological problems, especially physical aggression and delinquency. There is enough evidence from well-controlled or longitudinal studies to conclude that the risk of harmful side effects occurs:

- Regardless of the presence or absence of other forms of violence such as verbal aggression and physical violence between the parents
- Regardless of whether the data are based on reports by parents of punishment carried out recently, or on recall by adults of punishment as an adolescent
- Even after removing from the sample children whose parents kicked or punched, or did other acts of severe violence
- Regardless of the age or gender of the child, gender of the parent, or the socioeconomic status of the family
- Regardless of whether the parents were otherwise good parents or poor parents as measured by whether they did such things as show warmth and affection, monitor the child's behavior, explained and reasoned with the child, or were consistent in their expectations and discipline
- Regardless of whether the child was hit frequently or very rarely (although victims of frequent corporal punishment were more likely to suffer side effects)
- Regardless of social class, and in about half the studies which examined this issue, regardless of ethnic group

These summary statements oversimplify a very complex process. As Ross Parke, one of America's most distinguished child
psychologists, notes (1977), "The effectiveness [and side effect] of punishment is dependent on a variety of factors, including the timing and intensity of punishment, the nature of the relationship [between the parent and the child], the consistency with which punishment is administered, and the amount and type of verbal explanation that accompanies the punishment." Even that list is far from complete. For example, Parke's experiments show that the effectiveness of punishment is also influenced by the balance between reward and punishment, and later in the article just quoted, Parke discussed the impact of the child's style of interacting. He could also have mentioned the parent's ability to understand things from the child's perspective and to use that information. Despite the many other things that enter the equation, Parke concludes that "...physical punishment is generally unjustified and alternative techniques are both more humane and more effective" (p. 71).

That statement was made in 1977. Since then, there have been five editions of Parke's comprehensive child development textbook, but up to and including the most recent edition (Hetherington and Parke, 1999), the crucially important conclusion that "alternative techniques are both more humane and more effective" is nowhere to be found. Why it is nowhere to be found is an important question that I tried to answer in the preface to this edition and in Chapters 1 and 12. At this point, in the context of this discussion of the validity of the evidence concerning the harmful effects of corporal punishment, I will consider the possibility that textbook authors avoid recommending no-spanking because the currently available evidence makes that premature or even unethical.

Is It Premature To Advise Parents To Never Spank?

Some defenders of corporal punishment such as Larzelere et al. (1998) believe that an unconditional anti-spanking stance is unethical and irresponsible because even the evidence from the prospective studies summarized in Chapter 12 is not truly conclusive. However, there are circumstances when it is ethical and responsible to base advice on research that is less than conclusive. One example is research indicating, even though not conclusively, that a certain drug might have serious side effects. Advice based on that non-definitive evidence would be appropriate if there are
equally effective drugs available that do not have those side effects. The abundance of evidence in Part II and the postscript chapter showing that corporal punishment may have harmful side effects, even though it is not definitive, requires advising parents to not spank. This is an ethical requirement because the research evidence, including experimental studies, clearly indicates that non-corporal disciplinary strategies are just as effective in the immediate situation (Larzelere et al., 1998; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, and Pike, 1996; Roberts, 1988; Roberts and Powers, 1990), and more effective in the long run (Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims, 1997). Using non-violent modes of discipline avoids the increased risk of the many harmful side effects of corporal punishment documented in Part II and Chapter 12 without giving up a necessary mode of discipline.

Corporal Punishment in Historical Perspective

There are some isolated tribal hunting and gathering societies in which parents almost never hit children (Montague, 1978), but these non-violent societies are the exceptions. They are important, however, because they are also societies where relationships between adults tend to be non-violent (Montague, 1978; Levinson, 1989). Adult members of most non-literate tribal societies, like people in almost all literate societies, hit children and are also prone to violence among themselves. Societies in which children are hit have cultural norms and beliefs that label corporal punishment as different from violence between adults. But in reality, the basic elements are almost identical. In fact, the only important way they are different is that the culture defines one as legitimate and the other as criminal.

Adult violence is similar to corporal punishment because most violent acts by adults are carried out for what the attacker thinks at the time is a morally correct purpose or a sense of personal violation. Take, for example, a confrontation between two men over a $50 loan made three months ago that was to be paid back in a week. They get into a fight, and one is killed. Violence that the aggressor thinks is morally necessary can be seen on television daily. The classic scene is the Western movie barroom fight over cheating in a poker game, but there are hundreds of others. Corporal punishment by American parents is also similar to adult violence because it is usually impulsive and carried out in anger.
Cultural norms that make violence by parents legitimate have been the predominant pattern of humanity. Still, change is occurring. Within the Western world, corporal punishment by parents, and others who are responsible for children has clearly decreased since the seventeenth century (DeMause, 1984; Radbill, 1987; Newell, 1989). The major decrease has been in the most extreme types of violence—physical abuse—but for the less extreme violence known as corporal punishment, the pace of change has been glacial. Nevertheless, glaciers do move and when they do, have tremendous impact.

A Moral Passage

A social problem exists when people come to believe that some state of affairs is morally indefensible and needs to be changed (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). The situation may have existed for hundreds or thousands of years, but since it was not defined as a social problem people did not consider it wrong. Corporal punishment illustrates this principle. Children have been hit since the dawn of history and it has not been considered a social problem. Even today, chapters 1 and 2 show that hitting children continues to be defined as necessary, correct, and moral, not as a social problem to be condemned and changed. But we are now starting to experience what Gusfield (1963, 1981) calls a “moral passage.” Although the pace of change has been slow and there are some counter trends, spanking and other legal forms of corporal punishment are being redefined more and more as a social problem. There are a number of signs that moral evaluation of hitting children is changing.

The most dramatic change occurred in 1979, when Sweden became the first country to make spanking children illegal. The movement has since spread to the rest of Scandinavia, with Finland following in 1984, Denmark in 1986, and Norway in 1987. Austria followed in 1989. In 1985, the Council of Europe recommended that its member nations limit or prohibit corporal punishment by parents.

In the United States, a series of less dramatic, but still important events has been taking place. In 1989, Adrienne Haeuser, a professor of social work who studied the Swedish law (Haeuser, 1990), organized a conference with support from the Johnson Foundation. The purpose was to develop a strategy to end corporal pun-
ishment by parents. That conference brought together a distinguished group of psychologists, pediatricians, educators, social workers, and sociologists, who adopted a position statement opposing corporal punishment by parents. Following this conference, several major organizations adopted position statements opposing corporal punishment by parents, including Parents Anonymous, the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, the National Foster Parent Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Association of Social Workers.

In 1991, Philip Greven's book, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*, was praised in the *New York Times* book review section and other reviews. If this book had been published a decade or two earlier, the *New York Times* might not have reviewed it at all, much less reviewed it favorably. That same year also saw the establishment of EPOCH-USA, with a distinguished advisory board. EPOCH (End Physical Punishment Of Children) began in England in 1989 and has become a multinational federation of similar-thinking organizations.¹

In 1992, Division 37 of the American Psychological Association established a task force charged with encouraging research on corporal punishment and with drafting a resolution that, would put the association on record as opposing corporal punishment by parents. The American Academy of Pediatrics created a similar task force in 1991. Both groups, however, have had difficulty reaching a consensus.

In 1992, the national Kiwanis organization purchased copies of a video tape called "Spanking—What To Do Instead" (Bavolek, 1992) and encouraged local chapters to show it. This indicates that idea of bringing up children without hitting is starting to take hold outside of academic life.

One of the great ironies of the campaign against child abuse is that the leading federal agency on child abuse—the National Center on Child Abuse And Neglect—still does not discourage corporal punishment in any of its major publications. In fact, as noted in Chapter 6, one of their most recent and widely circulated publications implicitly endorses corporal punishment. As for other child abuse prevention organizations, despite the position statements they adopted in 1989, none has made ending corporal punishment by parents a major part of its approach. But they are creeping up on it.
The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse has been the leading private organization focused on preventing child abuse since the mid-1970s. It ignored corporal punishment until 1983, and in 1992 started distributing pamphlets on how to discipline a child without spanking. That is an important step, even though none of the committee’s pamphlets or posters on physical abuse explicitly links spanking with physical abuse and says that a child should never be slapped or spanked.

The National Advisory Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, established by Congress in 1988, has come out against corporal punishment by everyone except parents. But the fact that the committee has addressed the issue of corporal punishment at all is encouraging.

Although no national child-abuse prevention organization has made corporal punishment by parents a major focus, the issue has finally made its way to their agendas, however tenuously. This may signal the end of the policy of ignoring corporal punishment documented in chapters 1 and 6.

Another sign of progress, even if not yet a turning point, was a bill introduced into the 1992 Wisconsin legislature to ban corporal punishment by parents. This is probably the first bill of its type to come before an American state legislature, and that is more important than the fact that the bill did not progress beyond a committee hearing.

There is at least one other important sign of change—the ending of corporal punishment in public schools. In 1979, only four of the 50 U.S. states prohibited corporal punishment in the schools. In 1987 the National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools was founded. By 1989, the number of states prohibiting corporal punishment in schools had grown to 19, and by 1993 to 25. The National Education Association (NEA), the nation’s largest organization of teachers, finally dropped its opposition to ending corporal punishment by teachers (although state NEAs continue to be among the most important opponents of such legislation). The number of states considering a ban on hitting children in schools is growing, and it is likely that many state laws will be passed despite opposition by state teachers’ organizations and Protestant fundamentalists.

Except for the trend to prohibit hitting children in schools, none the changes just listed is by itself momentous. I suggest that together they mark the beginning of a major social trend—a moral
passage in which behavior that previously was expected of parents will become reprehensible. If such a moral passage is in progress, the question is why it is occurring at this point in history. What are the underlying historical and social forces? Are these forces likely continue and, if so, what does that suggest for the future?

Social Changes Underlying the Moral Passage

Why is the late twentieth century a time when the slow pace of change in corporal punishment seems to be speeding up? Many influences are at work, three of which will be briefly discussed. They are the expansion of human rights and humanitarian values, the development of a post-industrial economic system, and the growth of social scientific knowledge and the idea that social policies and services should be based on that knowledge.

Expansion of Human Rights

Human rights and humanitarian values are expanding to include groups that were previously denied equal rights and protection. Slavery was abolished more than a century ago. The remnants of slavery in the form of official racial segregation ended a generation ago in the United States and recently in South Africa. Women achieved the right to vote early in this century, and the remaining legal discrimination is just about gone. Equality in non-legal matters between men and women is still to be achieved (Hochschild, 1989; Martin, 1993; Sugarman and Straus, 1988; Straus, 1994b), but the movement is clearly in that direction.

Children are next on the agenda, including the right of a child to be free from the risk of physical assault by parents. The basis of this change is not evidence that corporal punishment harms children, just as the abolition of slavery was not fundamentally based on evidence that slavery hurt the economy, although in both cases there is an underlying connection. Instead, the change is in moral principles or beliefs. More and more people believe it is immoral to hit children, just as they have come to believe that it is immoral to own slaves or to “physically chastise an errant wife” (the old common-law right of husbands).

An expansion of human rights and humanitarian principles is only one of the causes of the change in corporal punishment.
Another that I believe is extremely important is the development of a post-industrial economy and social system.

**Transition to a Post-Industrial Economy**

Over the broad sweep of human history, the basic activities needed to sustain life—the subsistence patterns—have changed dramatically. There are three broad types of subsistence patterns: hunting and gathering, agricultural, and industrial. Within the final pattern, post-industrial societies (Bell, 1954), or advanced industrial societies (Janowitz, 1978), are distinguished from other industrial societies.

As the economic basis of human life evolved from hunting and gathering to a post-industrial economy, new social institutions developed and existing institutions adapted to the changes (Harris, 1977). Over the long run, fundamental changes in the economic system tend to produce fundamental changes in the family and visa versa (Lee, 1982, Skolnick, 1992; Straus, 1977). The application of that principle to corporal punishment is summarized in Table 11–1.

Levinson’s analysis of Human Relations Area Files data and his review of other studies (1989) show that corporal punishment tends to be least prevalent in hunting and gathering societies and most prevalent in agricultural and industrial societies. Why is this so? On the surface, agricultural and industrial societies seem to have little in common, and post-industrial societies even less in com-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Society</th>
<th>Predominant Characteristics of Major Adult Roles, Especially Occupational</th>
<th>Correctional and Control Strategies that Serve as Anticipatory Socialization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural, Industrial</td>
<td>Obedience, Conformity, Loyalty</td>
<td>Corporal punishment, Absolute rules, Unquestioned obedience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunt/Gather, Post-Industrial</td>
<td>Individuality, Autonomy, Cooperativeness</td>
<td>Reward, Explanation, Negotiation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mon with hunting and gathering societies. However, cross-cultural research on corporal punishment by Petersen et al. (1982) and Ellis and Petersen (1992) has identified an important common element.

In hunting and gathering societies, adults are frequently away by themselves foraging or hunting, or hunting in small groups. Survival depends on being independent and self-directed as well as being able to be a team player. In that type of society, it is important that parents bring up children who can be self-directed and independent, yet who can cooperate with one another as equals.

By contrast, Peterson et al. suggest that in agricultural and other complex societies, adults are primarily supervised by other people and must follow directions. Farms, businesses, and factories are owned privately, not collectively by the workers. The wealth and power derived from these individually owned enterprises is the property of wealthy and powerful people who use their wealth or influence to secure leadership positions in political and religious organizations. This further increases the hierarchical nature of the society. The inheritance system concentrates wealth and moves society still further away from equality. Industrial societies also need a disciplined labor force whose members can follow orders and tend machines.

Every society develops methods of bringing up children that will equip them to fulfill the roles they will play as adults. Agricultural and traditional industrial societies need members who can be obedient members of hierarchical groups, such as the male-dominated farm family or church, or the assembly-line factory. It is no accident that the only adult institutions in Western society that continued corporal punishment until the twentieth century were the most hierarchical of all institutions—the armed forces. Families also have remained very hierarchical, with many parents continuing to value unquestioning obedience, both for its own sake and as preparation for life. If unquestioning obedience is required of their children, those parents believe that corporal punishment can help equip children to take their place in that type of society (Kohn, 1977; Pearl, 1971). Evidence from studies using the Human Relations Area Files shows that “the more conformity is valued relative to self-reliance, the more physical punishment is used in child rearing” (Ellis and Petersen, 1992, p. 47).

The same line of reasoning can be applied to the emerging post-industrial type of society. A post-industrial society requires that a
larger proportion of the population be self-directed, independent, and creative, with the skills to cooperate, explain, and negotiate. When parents hit their children, they are teaching almost the opposite of the behaviors and skills their children will need. As noted in Chapter 9, relatively few jobs in a post-industrial society require a strong back and a weak mind. Instead, occupations are predominantly in management, services, the professions, and sciences. Services and management require skills in human relationships and in negotiating, among other things. These are not traits that are fostered by corporal punishment. Most high-level occupations also require the ability to be self-directed and independent, but also cooperative. There is a hierarchy of management today, but at each level, team management is becoming more prevalent. The same trend is occurring among blue-collar workers as more jobs require flexibility and decision making rather than the strength and perseverance required to maintain the pace of a typical assembly line. This is illustrated by Blauner's study of oil-refinery workers (1964). Where the assembly line survives, it is also being transformed. The line is now being organized by teams of workers who have mutual responsibility for production and quality control of a product or a major component of a product. It is reasonable to compare this new subsistence pattern with small groups of mutually dependent hunters.

For the reasons just presented, we seem to be on the threshold of a moral passage that will transform Western culture from one in which almost all children are socialized by corporal punishment to one in which this occurs for only a small minority of the population.

Although theoretically the growth in certain occupations has caused the shift away from corporal punishment, broad historical changes are always complex. For example, Chapter 9 showed that corporal punishment is linked with occupational and economic achievement. This is consistent with the idea that the tiny but growing number of children whose parents deviated from the social norm by using little or no corporal punishment contributed disproportionately to the growth of the new industrial and social technology that is creating our post-industrial society.

Over time, even small changes in corporal punishment will accumulate because children who were not spanked tend to be nonspankers themselves (see Chapter 4, and Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980, p. 107). They learn from their own experience that children do not "need" to be spanked. Graziano and Namaste
(1990), for example, found that 72 percent of young adults who were spanked believed that spanking is effective, compared to only 28 percent of those who were not spanked. In addition, 47 percent of those who were spanked believed that "children need to be spanked to teach discipline," compared to 17 percent of those who were not spanked. Similar results were found by a 1981 Swedish study (cited in Newell, 1989, p. 16). It found that 41 percent of those who were physically punished believed that spanking was necessary in bringing up children, compared to only 11 percent of those who had not been hit by their parents.

**Legitimating Role of Social Science**

The steadily increasing quantity and quality of social science research on what it takes to bring up healthy non-delinquent children is a third development that makes a contribution to the emerging moral passage. At present, this is a minor contribution because it is indirect. The research shows the powerful role of parental warmth. Also important is setting standards and being an example of those standards, monitoring the child, and consistently enforcing standards. By implication, if a parent does these things, corporal punishment will not be necessary. Consequently, books for parents based on that research indirectly say that corporal punishment is not necessary. As chapters 1 and 10 noted, however, social scientists and authors of parental-advice books usually avoid saying that a child should never be spanked. Even psychologists such as Ross Parke, who are opposed to corporal punishment, phrase their opposition to imply that there are situations in which corporal punishment is appropriate. Parke (1982, p. 71), for example, says "...physical punishment is generally unjustified and alternative techniques are both more humane and more effective."

Earlier in this chapter we showed that more organizations and authors are starting to pay attention to corporal punishment. Authors of books and articles are starting to say unambiguously that a child should never be hit. An article in the June, 1993 *Redbook* magazine "The Ten Worst Discipline Mistakes" (Eberlin, 1993) illustrates the change. Spanking is not among the ten. However, there is one brief paragraph that says:

Though spanking or slapping may halt misbehavior temporarily, over the long term physical punishment will backfire. A kid who's smacked
doesn’t learn self-control; he learns fear—and that it’s OK for a bigger person to hit a smaller one.

Even five years earlier, that paragraph would probably not have been in a mass-circulation magazine. If it had been written, it might have been deleted by a nervous editor who was afraid of alienating readers. Or, it might have been changed to say that parents should avoid spanking “if possible.” It is a milestone when a paragraph that says unambiguously to never spank appears in a mass circulation magazine. In another five years, magazines of this type are likely to be carrying entire articles that say to never hit a child. They might even use the word hit rather than the epithemism spank. The Spring, 1992 issue of Mothering led the way among widely circulated magazines. It published an article by Adrienne Haauer called “Swedish Parents Don’t Spank,” and featured it on the cover with the headline “Giving up Spanking.” There are many other such signs of a change in our culture, as well. Ann Landers, the columnist who previously approved of and occasionally recommended corporal punishment, now says, no hitting.

As the idea of never hitting a child starts to become as uncontroversial as the idea of never hitting a spouse, there is likely to be a flowering of research on corporal punishment, just as there has been on wife beating (Straus, 1992a). This, coupled with the increasing acceptance of the idea that social science should guide our society, is likely to give that research even more clout.

Research on corporal punishment is not the only research that has been ignored; most social science research is ignored. One of the main reasons is because there is no “buyer” who can see a way to profit from corporal punishment research. In the case of social science research, the buyer is usually an interest group or social science movement that can use the theoretical approach and the research to legitimize a cause. The connections between activists and researchers actually flow in both directions. Social science research is much more likely on topics that are also the focus of a social movement (Straus, 1992a). So, the research on corporal punishment since the turn of the century has been sporadic and largely ignored (see chapters 1 and 7). But, as sentiment against corporal punishment grows and interest groups such as EPOCH-USA are formed, the old research is being dug up, and an increasing amount of new research eventually will be published and publicized.
The primary use of the research is likely to be what Pelz (1978), and Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) identify as “conceptual” and “legitimative.” The conceptual use provides intellectual justification in the form of a theory. In other words, social science theories make the new moral beliefs scientifically rational. Social science research can provide evidence that new moral beliefs result in social and psychological conditions that are better than what prevailed under the old moral order. In our situation it is the belief that children will be better behaved and better off if parents do not hit them. Research in this area and research showing that the majority of adolescents are still being hit by their parents can help what has been called “claims making” in the struggle to focus public attention and resources on ending corporal punishment (Aronson, 1984; Best 1987; Gusfield, 1989).

Lessons from the Swedish No-Spanking Law

Sweden led the way in forbidding corporal punishment by parents; and more information is available on what happened in Sweden than in other countries that have passed similar laws. That information could help guide the movement against spanking in other countries, as it has in Norway, Finland, Denmark, Cyprus, Latvia, Croatia, Italy, and Austria. For one thing, the Swedish experience illustrates the way a small protest group can define a social problem and bring about change. At first, the abolition of corporal punishment in Sweden was greeted by derisive cartoons and editorials. Had it been up to the public at large, the change might not have occurred. In passing the law, the Swedish parliament evidently responded to the “claims makers” (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977) who were concerned about what seemed to be a dramatic increase in child abuse. They sought to redefine what was then legal and morally correct behavior carried out by most parents as a social problem that needed to be remedied. The objections and ridicule were gradually replaced by acceptance and an appreciation of the law. Today, 71 percent of Swedes favor managing children without corporal punishment. There are a number of reasons for the change in public opinion.

One is that the public has come to accept and welcome the no-spanking law because it is part of the civil code, not the criminal code. There are no criminal penalties for punishing parents who spank. The fear was that thousands of parents could be hauled
into court, but obviously that never occurred. Rather than dole out punishment, the Swedish law was intended to establish a new national standard, to educate, and to help parents and children. After the law was passed, for example, the government sent all parents of children under age three a booklet on discipline without corporal punishment.

The help for parents provided by the no-spanking law is another reason for the change in public opinion. Parents who use corporal punishment are not labeled and defined as mean or cruel under the Swedish law. The law assumes that all parents occasionally have trouble managing their children and need help in this difficult task. Many kinds of assistance are available to help parents learn how to manage their children without hitting. Since most parents can use help at one time or another, the law has come to be appreciated rather than resented.

The law also aims to educate children as well as parents. Children are told in school and through the mass media that parents are not allowed to hit them. That probably sounds underhanded or even sinister to most Americans because of the depth of the American commitment to corporal punishment. It does not sound sinister or underhanded to Americans when children are told that everyone should wear a car seat belt, that no one should smoke, and that adults are not allowed to touch children’s genitals. Americans enthusiastically support the idea that children should tell someone if a parent or other adult tries to have sex with them, but they are shocked by the idea that children should do the same if a parent physically assaults them. The difference is a matter of what society defines as wrong. Sex with children is defined as wrong (as it should be); hitting children is not, but also should be.

Why isn’t hitting children also defined as wrong? One of the reasons is that hitting children to correct and train them reflects a deep but rarely perceived cultural approval of violence to correct many types of wrongs. It shows up in both subtle and obvious ways. For example, 75 percent of Americans endorsed the idea that it is good for boys to get into fist fights when they are growing up (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). Most Americans believe that murderers should be killed, and most Americans supported the Panama Invasion of 1989 and the Gulf War of 1991, both of which were examples of gunboat diplomacy. Given this deep-seated commitment to violence as a means of correcting wrongs, passing a law outlawing corporal punishment in the U.S. is not likely to
have the same effect as in Sweden. American culture also needs to change in some fundamental ways.

Finally, the experience with Sweden's law gives us hints about the long-term effects of banning corporal punishment. There are no data on the extent to which the actual hitting of children has decreased since the law was passed in 1979. Swedish public opinion has changed drastically, however, and it is likely that this reflects at least some change in the behavior of the public. If change in attitudes is an important step in changing behavior, the Swedes have taken that step.

The history of other radical humanitarian social changes is similar. There is strong opposition at first, sometimes even war, as in the case of slavery in the United States. Sometimes there is just derision and foot dragging, as in the case of voting rights for women. The civil rights gains of the 1960s and the gains in women's rights in the 1970s depended on a mobilized minority. Had these issues been put to a popular vote at the time, like the Swedish law on corporal punishment, they might not have passed. If fact, the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution did not pass. Today, although there is lingering opposition, the overwhelming majority of Americans favor equal rights for women as well as for African-Americans and other minorities. Corporal punishment of children is as deeply ingrained an aspect of American society as was the idea that African-Americans and women are inferior human beings. It will take the determined efforts of a mobilized minority to end this ancient evil.

Obstacles to Ending Corporal Punishment

Even assuming that the moral passage towards a no-spanking standard has begun and that there are well-organized and well-funded advocacy groups pushing that change (there are not), the outlook is not good for a no-spanking law in the near future in the United States. Just mentioning a law to make hitting children illegal is almost universally regarded as off the wall. Even among professionals concerned with child abuse, only a tiny minority favors such a law. But social change is notoriously difficult to predict and, as we have seen, there are some favorable signs.

Most of the opposition or worry about abolishing the right of parents to hit their children takes the form of the cultural myths about corporal punishment described in the previous chapter.
However, there are also other obstacles, some even more deeply embedded. These obstacles reflect some deep-seated aspects of American culture and the American psyche. Among these are the approval of violence, extreme individualism, fear of government intervention in the family, and attitudes toward punishment. There also is the opposition of Protestant fundamentalists.

**Individualism, Punitiveness, and Fear**

American individualism reflects itself in many ways, both good and bad (Lipset, 1963). It is the basis for civil liberties, a source of economic strength, and a source of economic weaknesses. It underlies our fear of government interference in the economy and the family. The punitive nature of American culture and the American psyche also is related to our individualism.

When a law forbidding parents to hit children is mentioned, almost everyone believes it will result in the expensive and humiliating arrest and prosecution of parents, including parents who are struggling to do their best for their children, even if it is in misguided ways. If a non-spanking law has a policy of informing children and parents that spanking is prohibited, the specter arises of children informing on their parents. There is also a fear that welfare authorities will take children from their parents.

The Scandinavian experience provides no basis for such fears. Sweden, for example, is sometimes depicted as a very interventionist society, but it has much lower rate of children in foster homes or institutions than the United States. Furthermore, during the decade following the passage of Sweden's no-spanking law, the rate of moving children into foster homes and institutions did not increase, it decreased (Newell, 1989). The fact that children are so rarely placed under state supervision in Sweden and are so frequently in the United States reflects different political and social policies. The United States is committed to minimum government interference in family life. But, although that is not the intent, this commitment denies help to many families who need it. The ironic result is more drastic intervention in the long run, such as removing the child to a foster home. Sweden is committed to looking after the health and well-being of all children. All new parents are visited by a public health nurse, there is a compulsory medical examination at age four, family leave is extensive and paid, and so on. The long-term effect of this government “inter-
ference" is, not surprisingly, that things rarely get so bad that a child has to be removed from his or her home.

As for prosecutions under the no-spanking laws, Newell (1989) notes that in Sweden "...there has been no rush by children to drag their parents through the courts. It appears that there has been only one prosecution in 10 years ..." There have been none at all in Finland. The single prosecution in Sweden was not under the no-spanking law—it was under the criminal law on assault. The purpose of Sweden's no-spanking law is to set a national standard, to educate parents about that standard, and to help them bring up their children in accordance with the humane principles of that standard. The studies of Durrant (1999), Haeuser (1990), Newell (1989), Peltonini (1983), Ziegert (1983), and Solheim (1982) show that this is happening.

**Fundamentalist Opposition**

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" may be the single best-known "Biblical quotation." In fact, it is not from the Bible at all. That makes little difference, though, because there are numerous genuine Biblical passages that support corporal punishment or can be interpreted as supporting corporal punishment. Fundamentalist Protestants are a large segment of American society—about 28 percent (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993) —and they are increasing, while more mainstream denominations are decreasing. However, those who leave mainstream denominations have not necessarily become fundamentalists. Many have just become more secularized, and they may be part of what is fueling the move away from corporal punishment.

Assuming that fundamentalists will be the group that most resists ending corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993; Grasmick et al., 1991; Greven, 1991), it makes sense to focus on the majority of the population whose belief in corporal punishment is mainly secular. That is a sufficiently challenging goal. When the rest of the population has changed its attitude, the difference in the national climate will make it easier for the fundamentalists to change. In that context, they could well change on their own accord, just as almost all Catholics now use contraceptives. It may in fact be easier because although the core of fundamentalism is said to be a literal interpretation of the Bible, that really means "selective literalism." Not many fundamentalists have given all their worldly possessions to the poor, for example.
Cultural Rights and Family Privacy

Many African-Americans and some others (for example, Robert Larzelere, 1993) argue that an effort to end spanking amounts to imposing the unproven beliefs of one segment of society on others. Respect for minority rights is extremely important. But, valid and important principles often contradict other valid and important principles. One such principle is that children should be treated in ways that do not injure them. Unfortunately, the traditional culture of many societies does include injurious practices. Robert Edgerton's book, Sick Societies: Challenging: the Myth of Primitive Harmony (1992), gives many examples of injurious practices that are part of traditional cultures, and have been for centuries. Some of these apply to the whole society, such as the Dugum Dani, where warfare was valued and frequently practiced. Some apply to powerless segments of the society, such as footbinding of women in China or genital mutilation of girls in much of Northeast Africa. Mutilation of female genitals is an important example because, like spanking, it is defended most by its victims. It also is defended by Muslims who claim it is part of the Koran. Even if genital mutilation were in the Koran, it would still be a culturally approved form of abuse that kills many children and mars the life of those who survive the operation.

The injury from corporal punishment, like the injury from heavy smoking, is in the form of harmful side effects that, fortunately, most people escape. But the risk of side effects is there. Just as smokers have no way of seeing the harm they are doing to their bodies, parents have no way of seeing the harm they are unknowingly doing to their children. As this book shows, the injuries are not trivial. The principles of respecting traditional cultures and protecting family privacy conflict with the principle that children should be disciplined in ways that do not increase their risk of physical and mental problems. The choice is between principles. There is less of a quandary in the case of corporal punishment because there are ways of teaching and correcting misbehavior that are just as effective or more effective. It also is possible to make an accommodation between a commitment to the well-being of children and individual freedom, parental rights, and respect for cultural diversity. In Sweden there is no criminal penalty for spanking; instead, the law assumes that when parents spank, it is because they are having trouble controlling a child. The Swedes
try to help such parents achieve the kind of control that helps children grow into decent human beings. When parents have that ability, they don’t “need” to spank. Ending or reducing spanking in this way does not infringe on people’s values because even parents who approve of spanking on religious or cultural grounds usually prefer that it were not necessary.

Cultural rights are only one reason for caution in using the law to end hitting children. It also may be a tactical mistake. It may be best to think of an anti-spanking law as a step that will help complete, rather than begin, the moral passage to a society in which children are not hit. In the meantime, government can do many things. It can sponsor research that may provide definitive evidence on the benefits of not spanking children. Government also can educate, as it has done on smoking and the use of seat belts. Part of that education can be in the form of warning labels on birth certificates and baby food, and in posters in the offices of pediatricians. These educational campaigns can draw on parents’ obviously strong desire for their children to be happy and successful, just as the anti-smoking campaign drew on the obviously strong desire of people to avoid dying of lung cancer. As that campaign gained strength and the no-smoking cause was taken up by the elite, it became fashionable to not smoke rather than to smoke. Gradually the ground was prepared for the no-smoking laws that are being passed in many states and cities. The same scenario is likely for no hitting, but how long it will take is anyone’s guess.

A Society Without Corporal Punishment

Research over the past 40 years been remarkably consistent in showing that hitting children increases the chances of a child becoming physically aggressive, delinquent, or both. The research in this book leads me to conclude that corporal punishment leaves invisible scars that affect many other aspects of life.

The results of those studies come at a point when the economic order is changing society in ways as fundamental as the changes accompanying the agricultural revolution thousands of years ago and the industrial revolution 200 years ago. The new social roles and psychological perspectives are inconsistent with corporal punishment. The change in world view being created by this massive change in society and the new information about the serious
harm resulting from hitting children may together accelerate the transition to a new moral order. This moral passage will transform hitting children from something that loving parents are expected to do "when necessary" to an unacceptable evil. Regardless of whether ending corporal punishment reduces the rate of psychological and social problems among adults, ending the nearly universal practice of hitting children, in itself, makes society more humane. In addition, to the extent that hitting children is one of the causes of social and psychological problems, ending the time-honored practice of hitting children will affect all aspects of life. It will accelerate changes in the social order and have profound implications for creating a more humane society.

Hitting children is so common, so taken for granted, that the idea that ending the practice will have profound benefits for individuals and society is ridiculous to most people. They may be right. Although I do not think they are right, I do agree that there are three major grounds for skepticism.

First, as noted earlier, the links between corporal punishment and social and psychological problems may be false. Second, eliminating corporal punishment does not necessarily mean that the new state of affairs would be better. The effects of social change are notoriously difficult to predict, although it is fairly certain that perfection is not something humanity is likely to achieve. What is perfect for most children may be excruciatingly painful for others. The use of "social evolution" in the title of this chapter does not mean that society tends to get better and better. I do not believe that there can ever be a perfect society—unless you consider an ant-hill society as perfect! Every social arrangement suits some better than others, so there are always casualties of society. Some social arrangements produce more casualties (Edgerton, 1992), however. An example of this is violent child rearing.

Third, although this book shows that hitting children is related to many serious social and psychological problems, most of which have not been considered consequences of corporal punishment, the statistics in Appendix C also show that corporal punishment is only a small part of the explanation for these problems. So, even if all parents stopped hitting their children, it would not mean the end of violence, crime, depression, masochistic sex, and so on.

Let us assume that ending corporal punishment will result in a 10 percent reduction in these problems. Is that a "profound" change? It clearly is for the 10 percent who are spared these prob-
lems. There are also indirect victims, however. A much larger percentage will be spared the pain of being victimized by the crimes of this 10 percent. An even larger number will be spared the trauma of having a family member succumb to mental illness. Others will be spared the economic costs of the mental health problems of the 10 percent. While it is impossible to know the percentages and difficult to be sure that some new evil will not replace hitting children, the research reported in this book suggests that:

- Bringing up children without hitting will reduce the stress and trauma of being a parent and being a child. Parents will be able to bring up their children with less hassle. Young children, on the average, will be better behaved, and among older children, there will be less delinquency.

- When these children are adults and parents themselves, they will be less likely to physically abuse their spouses and children.

- Family relationships will be more rewarding because there will be a closer bond between parents and children.

- A society with little or no hitting of children is likely to result in fewer people who are alienated, depressed, or suicidal, and in fewer violent marriages.

- The potential benefits for the society as a whole are equally great. These include lower crime rates, especially for violent crimes; increased economic productivity; and less money spent on controlling or treating crime and mental illness.

A society that brings up children by caring, humane, and non-violent methods is likely to be less violent, healthier, wealthier, and wiser. This will occur partly as a direct effect of not hitting children, but also because caring, humane, and non-violent child rearing can only predominate in a society that nurtures those characteristics. This book may be appearing at a point in history that is about to experience a social change that may seem minor to most people—the elimination of corporal punishment—but which will have profound and far reaching benefits for humanity.
The Benefits of Never Spanking: New and More Definitive Evidence

Virtually a revolution has occurred in the state of scientific knowledge about the long-term effects of corporal punishment in just the six years since Beating The Devil Out Of Them was published. The main purpose of this chapter is to summarize the results of that new research and to explain why the new research shows, more clearly than ever before, the benefits of avoiding corporal punishment.

Somewhat ironically, at the same time as this evidence was appearing, voices arose in state legislatures, the mass media, and in social science journals to defend corporal punishment. Consequently, a second purpose is to put these recent defenses of corporal punishment in perspective.

This is followed by a section explaining a paradox concerning trends in corporal punishment. Public belief in the necessity of corporal punishment and the percentage of parents who hit teenagers is about half of what it was only 30 years ago. Despite these dramatic changes, the percent of parents who spanked toddlers was about the same in 1995 as it was in 1975.

The chapter concludes with an estimate of the benefits to children, to parents, and to society as a whole that could occur if corporal punishment were to cease.

Defenders of corporal punishment say or imply that no-corporal punishment is the same as no-discipline or “permissiveness” (see for example Baumrind, 1996). Consequently, before discussing the new research, it is important to reemphasize the point made
in Chapter 10 about this myth: that no-corporal punishment does not mean no-discipline. Writers and organizations leading the movement away from corporal punishment believe that rules and discipline are necessary, but that they will be more effective without corporal punishment. Their goal is to inform parents about these more effective disciplinary strategies, as exemplified in the very name of one such organization—the Center For Effective Discipline (see their web site: http://www.stophitting.com; see also the web site of Positive Parenting program http://parenting.umn.edu).

The Chicken and Egg Problem with Previous Research on Corporal Punishment

In order to grasp the importance of the new research, the limitations of the previous 45 years of research need to be understood. These 45 years saw the publication of more than 80 studies linking corporal punishment to child behavior problems such as physical violence. A meta-analysis of these studies by Thompson (in press) found that almost all showed that the more corporal punishment a child had experienced, the worse the behavior of the child. Thompson's review reveals a consistency of findings that is rare in social science research. Thompson concluded that "Although...corporal punishment does secure children's immediate compliance, it also increases the likelihood of eleven [types of] negative outcomes [such as increased physical aggression by the child and depression later in life]. Moreover, as pointed out in the new preface, experiments and other studies conducted by defenders of corporal punishment show that, even when the criterion is immediate compliance, non-corporal discipline strategies work just as well as corporal punishment (Larzelere et al., 1998; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson and Pike, 1996; Roberts, 1988; Roberts and Powers, 1990).

The chapters in Part II are examples of the type of negative outcome reviewed by Thompson. To take a specific example, Chart 7-2 (page 104) shows that the more corporal punishment experienced, the greater the probability of hitting a wife or husband later in life. Another example is a study of kindergarten children by Strassberg et al. (1994). The data on corporal punishment for this study was obtained by interviews with the mothers of the children. Six months later, the children were observed in school and instances of physical aggression were tallied for each child. The
CHART 12–1. Physical attacks on other children in kindergarten are twice as frequent if the mother used corporal punishment six months earlier

![Chart showing the relationship between corporal punishment and physical attacks by children.]

MOTHER-TO-CHILD VIOLENCE

From Strausberg, Dodge, Petit, & Bates, 1994, p. 452

The second bar of Chart 12–1 shows that the children of mothers who used corporal punishment attacked other children twice as often as the children whose mothers did not. The third bar in Chart 12–1 also shows that the children of mothers who went beyond ordinary corporal punishment had four times the rate of attacking other children. This illustrates another principle: that the psychologically harmful effects of corporal punishment are parallel to the harmful effects of physical abuse, except that the magnitude of the effect is less.

Despite the unusually high constancy in the findings of research on corporal punishment, there is a serious problem with all the previous research. As pointed out in Chapter 11, the problem is that these studies do not indicate which is cause and which is
effect. That is, they do not take into account the fact that aggression and other behavior problems of the child lead parents to spank. The chart in chapter 7 showing that the more corporal punishment, the greater the probability of hitting a spouse later in life could simply indicate that the parents were responding to a high level of aggression by the child at Time 1. For example, they might have spanked because the child repeatedly grabbed toys from or hit a brother or sister. Since aggression is a relatively stable trait (Berkowitz, 1993), it is not surprising that the most aggressive children at Time 1 are still the most aggressive at Time 2 and are now hitting their wives or husbands. To deal with that problem, the research needs to take into account the child’s aggression or other antisocial behavior at Time 1 (the time of the spanking). Studies using that design can examine whether, in the months or years following, the behavior of children who were spanked improves (as most people in the USA think will be the case) or gets worse. There are finally new studies that use this design and provide information on long term change in the child’s behavior.

Five New Landmark Studies

In the three-year period 1997–1999 five studies became available that can be considered “landmark” studies because they overcame this serious defect in 45 years of previous research on the long-term effects of corporal punishment. All five of the new studies took into account the child’s behavior at Time 1, and all five were based on large and nationally representative samples of American children. None of them depended on adults recalling what happened when they were children.

Study 1: Corporal Punishment and Subsequent Antisocial Behavior

This research studied over 3,000 children in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims, 1997). The children were in three age groups: 3 to 5, 6 to 9, and 10 to 14. The mothers of all three groups of children were interviewed at the start of the study in 1988, and then again in 1990 and 1992. The findings were very similar for all three age groups and for change after two years and four years. To avoid excess detail only the results for the 6 to 9 year old children and for the
change in antisocial behavior two years after the first interview will be described here.

*Measure of corporal punishment.* To measure corporal punishment, the mothers were told “Sometimes kids mind pretty well and sometimes they don’t,” and asked “About how many times, if any, have you had to spank your child in the past week?”

*Measure of Antisocial Behavior.* To measure antisocial behavior the mothers were asked whether, in the past three months, the child frequently “cheats or tells lies”, “bullies or is cruel/mean to others”, “does not feel sorry after misbehaving”, “breaks things deliberately”, “is disobedient at school”, “has trouble getting along with teachers.” This was used to create a measure of the number of antisocial behaviors frequently engaged in by the child.

*Other Variables.* We also took into account several other variables that could affect antisocial behavior by the child. These include the sex of child, cognitive stimulation provided by the parents, emotional support by the mother, ethnic group of the mother, and socioeconomic status of the family.

*Findings.* Chart 12–2 shows that the more corporal punishment used during the first year of the study, the greater the tendency for antisocial behavior to increase subsequent to the corporal punishment. It also shows that this effect applied to both Euro American children and children of other ethnic groups. Of course, other things also influence Antisocial Behavior. For example, girls have lower rates of Antisocial Behavior than boys, and children whose mothers are warm and supportive are less likely to behave in antisocial ways. Although these other variables do lessen the effect of corporal punishment, we found that the tendency for corporal punishment to make things worse over the long run applies regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender of the child, and regardless of the extent to which the mother provides cognitive stimulation and emotional support.

*Study 2: A Second Study of Corporal Punishment and Antisocial Behavior*

*Sample and Measures.* Gunnov and Mariner (1977a) analyzed data from another large and representative sample of American children—the National Survey of Families and Households. They studied 1,112 children in two age groups: 4 to 7 and 8 to 11. In half of the cases the mother was interviewed and in the other half the
CHART 12–2. The more spanking was used to correct misbehavior, the worse the behaviour 2 years later, for both Euro-American and minority children.

* Adjusted for time-1 anti-social behaviour, cognitive stimulation, parental emotional support, child gender, and SES.

father provided the information. The parents were first interviewed in 1987–1988, and then 5 years later. Gunnoe and Mariner’s measure of corporal punishment was the same as in the Straus et al. study just described; that is, how often the parent spanked in the previous week.

Gunnoe and Mariner examined the effect of corporal punishment on two aspects of the child’s behavior: fighting at school and antisocial behavior. Their antisocial behavior measure was also the same as in the Straus et al. study.

Findings on Fighting. Gunnoe and Mariner found that the more corporal punishment in 1987–1988, the greater the amount of
fighting at school five years later. This is consistent with the theory that in the long run corporal punishment is counter-productive. However, for toddlers and for African-American children, they found the opposite, i.e. that corporal punishment is associated with less fighting 5 years later. Gunnoe and Mariner suggest that this occurs because younger children and African-American children tend to regard corporal punishment as a legitimate parental behavior rather than as an aggressive act. However, corporal punishment by parents of young children and by African-American parents is so nearly universal that it suggests an alternative explanation: that no-corporal punishment means no-discipline. If that is the case, it is no wonder that children whose parents exercise no-discipline are less well behaved. Corporal punishment may not be good for children, but failure to properly supervise and control is even worse.

FINDINGS ON ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR. The findings on the relation of corporal punishment to antisocial behavior show that the more corporal punishment experienced by the children in Year 1, the higher the level of antisocial behavior five years later. Moreover, they found that the harmful effect of corporal punishment applies to all the categories of children they studied—that is, to children in each age group, to all races, and to both boys and girls. Thus, both of these major long term prospective studies resulted in evidence that, although corporal punishment may work in the short run, in the long run it tends to boomerang and increase the probability of antisocial behavior.

An important sidelight of the Gunnoe and Mariner study is that it illustrates the way inconvenient findings can be ignored to give a desired “spin.” The findings section includes one brief sentence acknowledging that their study “replicates the Straus et al. findings.” This crucial finding is never discussed in detail. The extensive discussion and conclusion sections omit mentioning the results of their research showing that corporal punishment at Time 1 was associated with more antisocial behavior subsequently for children of all ages and all ethnic groups. Marjorie Gunnoe told me that she is opposed to spanking and has never spanked her own children. So the spin she put on the findings is not a reflection of personal values or behavior. Perhaps it reflects teaching at a college affiliated with a church which teaches that God expects parents to spank.
Study 3: Corporal Punishment and Child-to-Parent Violence

Brezina (1999) analyzed data on a nationally representative sample of 1,519 adolescent boys who participated in the Youth in Transition study. This is a three-wave panel study that was begun in 1966. Although the data refer to a previous generation of high school students, there is no reason to think that the relationship between corporal punishment and children hitting parents is different now that it was then, except that the rate may have decreased because fewer parents now slap teen-agers.

Measure of Corporal Punishment. Corporal punishment was measured by asking the boys “How often do your parents actually slap you?” The response categories ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Twenty eight percent of the boys reported being slapped by their parents during the year of the first wave of the study when their average age was 15, and 19 percent were slapped during the wave 2 year (a year and half later).

Measure of Child Aggression. The boys were asked similar questions about how often they hit their father and their mother. Eleven percent reported hitting a parent the first year, and 7 percent reported hitting a parent at Time 2 of the study.

Findings. Brezina found that corporal punishment at Time 1 was associated with an increased probability of a child assaulting the parent a year and a half later. Thus, while it is true that corporal punishment teaches the child a lesson, it is certainly not the lesson intended by the parents.

As with the other four studies, the data analysis took into account some of the many other factors that affect the probability of child-to-parent violence. These include the socioeconomic status and race of the family, the age of the parents, the child’s attachment to the parent, child’s attitude toward aggression, and child’s physical size.

Study 4: Corporal Punishment and Dating Violence

Simons, Lin, & Gordon (1998) tested the theory that corporal punishment by the parents increases the probability of later hitting a partner in a dating relationship. They studied 113 boys in a rural area of the state of Iowa, beginning when they were in the seventh grade or about age 13.

Measure of Corporal Punishment. The mothers and the fathers of these boys were asked how often they spanked or slapped the child
when he did something wrong, and how often they used a belt or paddle for corporal punishment. These questions were repeated in waves 2 and 3 of this 5-year study. The scores for the mother and the father for each of the three years were combined to create an overall measure of corporal punishment. More than half of the boys experienced corporal punishment during those years. Consequently, the findings about corporal punishment apply to the majority of boys in that community, not just to the children of a small group of violent parents.

**Measure of Dating Violence.** The information on dating violence came from the boys, so it is not influenced by whether the parents viewed the boy as aggressive. The boys were asked whether, in the last year, “When you had a disagreement with your girlfriend, how often did you hit, push, shove her?”

**Measure of Delinquency at Time 1.** As explained earlier, it is critical to take into account the misbehavior that leads parents to use corporal punishment. In this study, that was done by asking the boys at Time 1 how often they had engaged in each of 24 delinquent acts such as skipping school, stealing, and physically attacking someone with a weapon; and also how often they had used drugs and alcohol.

**Parental Involvement and Support.** Finally the study also took into account the extent to which the parents showed warmth and affection, were consistent in their discipline, monitored and supervised the child, and explained rules and expectations. In addition, it also controlled for witnessing parental violence.

**Findings.** Simons and his colleagues found that the more corporal punishment experienced by these boys, the greater the probability of their physically assaulting a girlfriend. Moreover, like the other prospective studies, the analysis took into account the misbehavior that led parents to use corporal punishment, and also for the quality of parenting. This means that the relation of corporal punishment to violence against a girlfriend is very unlikely to be due to poor parenting. Rather, it is another study showing that the long run effect of corporal punishment is to engender more rather than less misbehavior. In short, spanking boomerangs.

**Study 5: Corporal Punishment and Child’s Cognitive Development**

The last of these five studies (Straus and Paschall, 1999) was prompted by studies showing that talking to children (including
pre-speech infants) is associated with an increase in neural connections in the brain and in cognitive performance (Blakeslee, 1995). Those findings led us to theorize that if parents avoid corporal punishment, they are more likely to engage in verbal methods of behavior control such as explaining to the child, and that the increased verbal interaction with the child will in turn enhance the child’s cognitive ability.

This theory was tested on 806 children of mothers in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth who were age 2 to 4 in the first year of our analysis, and the tests were repeated for an additional 704 children who were age 5 to 9 in the first year. Corporal punishment was measured by whether the mother was observed hitting the child during the interview and by a question on frequency ofspanking in the past week. A corporal punishment scale was created by adding the number of times the parent spanked in two sample weeks. Cognitive ability was measured in Year 1 and two years later by tests appropriate for the age of the child at the time of testing such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test.

The study took into account the mother’s age and education, whether the father was present in the household, number of children in the family, mother’s supportiveness and cognitive stimulation, ethnic group, and the child’s age, gender, and child’s birth weight.

Chart 12–3 shows what we found. However, to understand this chart, a number of technical aspects need to be explained. One of them is that these cognitive ability scores follow the convention of making 100 the average for children of each age. Consequently, a decrease of, for example 1.5 points ("-1.5" in Figure 12–3) does not indicate that, after two years, the children in that group had less cognitive ability than at the start of the study. On the contrary, the children in a group with an average of -1.5, like all normal children, increased their cognitive skills tremendously in those two years. What a change of -1.5 points means is that the children in that group lagged behind the average rate of cognitive development by 1.5 points.

Children Age 2 to 4. The upper line in of Chart 12–3 is for children age 2 to 4 at the start of the study. (1) At the right side of the upper line are the children who were hit three or more times in the two sample weeks. This was the typical experience for children this age (48 percent). Since they are the typical children, it should not be surprising that they followed the typical pattern of cognitive development, as shown by the mean change of zero,
CHART 12-3. Children who were not spanked had faster than average mental development, and children who were spanked a lot fell behind the average.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN TWO SAMPLE WEEKS

* Adjusted for cognitive stimulation and emotional support by mother, mother’s age and education, child’s race, age and sex, number of children, birthweight, and father in household.

i.e. they did not either gain or fall behind other children in their cohort. (2) The children in the next group to the left are those who were hit less often during the two sample weeks (2 times) and their mean of +1 indicates slightly above average cognitive development. (3) The children who were hit only once during those two weeks gained considerably more (an average of 3 points) during the two years covered by the study. (4) Finally, at the upper left are the rare children (only 10 percent) who were not spanked in either of the two sample weeks. They gained an average of 5.5 points relative to the average cognitive ability of children their age. In summary, the upper line of Figure 13 shows that
the less corporal punishment parents use on toddlers, the greater the probability that the child will have an above average growth.

*Children Age 5-9.* The lower line of Chart 12-3 is for children age 5 to 9. (1) The plot point at the left for the children who were not spanked in the two sample weeks shows that they experienced above average cognitive growth during the two years of this study. However, the benefit is not as great as for toddlers (just under 2 points compared to 5.5 points for toddlers), perhaps because at age 5 to 9, not spanking is not as exceptional. (2) Children who were spanked once during the two sample weeks (the typical experience for this age) also experienced the typical pattern of cognitive development. However, those who were spanked two or three times during the two sample weeks, i.e., spanked more than average, fell behind the average cognitive development.

The greater benefit of avoiding corporal punishment for the younger children is consistent with the research showing the most rapid growth of neural connections takes place in the brain at early ages. It is also consistent with the theory that what the child learns as an infant and toddler is crucial because it provides the necessary basis for subsequent cognitive development (Johnson, 1999). The greater adverse effect on cognitive development for toddlers has an extremely important practical implication because the defenders of corporal punishment have now retreated to limiting their approval to toddlers (Friedman and Schonberg, 1996). Their recommendation is not based on empirical evidence. The evidence from this study suggests that, at least in so far as cognitive development is concerned, supporters of corporal punishment have unwittingly advised parents to use corporal punishment at the ages when it will have the most adverse effect on cognitive development.

*The Message of the Five Studies: “Don’t Spank”*

Each of the five studies I summarized is far from perfect. They can be picked apart one by one, as can just about every epidemiological study. This is what the tobacco industry did for many years. The Surgeon General’s committee on smoking did the opposite. Their review of the research acknowledged the limitations of the studies when taken one-by-one. But they concluded that despite the defects of the individual studies, the cumulative evidence indicated that smoking does cause lung cancer and other diseases, and they called for an end to smoking. In respect to spanking, I
believe that the cumulative weight of the evidence, and especially the five prospective studies provides sufficient evidence for a new Surgeon General’s warning. A start in that direction was made by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which published “Guidelines for Effective Discipline” that advises parents to avoid spanking (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998).

Is There a Backlash?

It is ironic that during the same period as the new and more definitive research was appearing, there were hostile or ridiculing articles in newspapers and magazines on the idea of never spanking a child (e.g., Lemonick and Park, 1997; Rosellini, 1998). In 1999, Arizona and Arkansas passed laws to remind parents and teachers that they have the right to use corporal punishment and to urge them to do so. There has also been a contentious debate in scientific journals on the appropriateness of corporal punishment. These developments made some advocates for children concerned that there is a backlash against the idea of no-spanking. However, there are several reasons for doubting the existence of a backlash in the sense of a reversal in the trend of decreasing public support for corporal punishment, or in the sense of non-spanking parents reverting to using corporal punishment.

The Trend Away From Corporal Punishment Continues

One reason for doubting the existence of a backlash is that, each year, a larger and larger proportion of the American population opposes corporal punishment. Chart 12–4 (updated from a chart in Straus and Mathur, 1996) shows that in 1968, which was only a generation ago, almost everyone (94 percent) believed that corporal punishment is sometimes necessary. But in the last 30 years, Chart 12–4 shows that public support for corporal punishment has been decreasing. By 1999, almost half of US adults rejected the idea that spanking is necessary.

The Advocates Are Long-Time Supporters

In 1968, those who favored corporal punishment did not need to speak out to defend their view because, as just indicated, almost everyone believed it was necessary. The dramatic decrease in support
CHART 12-4. The percent agreeing that a "good hard spanking is sometimes necessary" dropped from near unanimity to 55 percent in one generation.


for corporal punishment shown in Chart 12-4 means that long time advocates of corporal punishment such as Dobson (1992), Ezzo (1995), Larzelere (1994), and Rosemond (1994), now have reason to be worried and they are speaking out. These authors have always favored corporal punishment. Consequently, their recent publications do not indicate a backlash in the sense of a change from being opposed to corporal punishment to favoring it. I suggest that it is more like dying gasps of support for an ancient mode of bringing up children that is heading towards extinction.
Fear about the Increase in Crime by Youth

The efforts of those who favor corporal punishment have also been spurred on by the increase in crime in many countries. The rise in youth crime, although recently reversed, is a very disturbing trend, and it has prompted a search for causes and corrective steps. It should be no surprise that people who have always believed in use of corporal punishment believe that a return to their favored mode of bringing up children will help cure the crime problem. They argue that children need “discipline,” which is correct. However, they equate discipline with corporal punishment, which is not correct. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, no-corporal punishment does not mean no-discipline. Delinquency prevention does require, among other things, discipline in the sense of clear rules and standards for behavior and parental supervision, monitoring and enforcement (Empey, 1982). To the extent that part of the explanation for crime, especially crime by youth, is the lack of discipline, the appropriate step is not a return to corporal punishment but parental standards, monitoring, and enforcement by non-violent methods. In fact, as the studies just reviewed indicate, if discipline takes the form of more corporal punishment, the problem will be exacerbated because, while corporal punishment does work with some children, more typically it boomerangs and increases the level of juvenile delinquency and other behavior problems.

The Normal Questioning Mode of Science

The criticism in scientific journals of research on corporal punishment is also not a backlash. It has to be viewed in the light of the norms of science. A standard aspect of science is to examine research critically, to raise questions, and to suggest alternative interpretations of findings. This results in a somewhat paradoxical tendency for criticism to increase as the amount of research goes up. There has recently been an increase in research showing long-term harmful effects of corporal punishment. Given the critical ethos of science, it is only to be expected that the increased research has elicited more commentary and criticism, especially on the part of those who believed in corporal punishment in the first place.
Most Parent Education Inadvertently Perpetuates Corporal Punishment

Three paradoxical aspects of the movement away from corporal punishment will be highlighted in this section. The first is that, although approval of corporal punishment had declined precipitously in the last generation, almost all parents continue to spank toddlers. The second paradox is that professionals advising parents, including those who are opposed to spanking, generally fail to tell parents not to spank. They call this avoiding a “negative approach.” Finally, and most paradoxically of all, focusing almost exclusively on a so-called “positive approach,” unwittingly contributes to perpetuating corporal punishment and helps explain the first paradox.

Paradox 1: Contradictory Trends

Some aspects of corporal punishment have changed in major ways. A smaller and smaller percent of the public favors spanking. Fewer parents now use belts, hairbrushes, and paddles. The percent of parents who hit adolescents has dropped by half since 1975. Nevertheless, other aspects of corporal punishment continue to be prevalent, chronic, and severe. The 1995 Gallup national survey of parents (Straus and Stewart, 1999) found that:

- Almost all parents of toddlers (94 percent) used corporal punishment that year
- Parents who spanked a toddler, did it an average of about three times a week
- 28 percent of parents of children age 5–12 used an object such as a belt or hairbrush
- Over a third of parents of 13-year-old children hit them that year

The myths about corporal punishment in Chapter 10 provide important clues to understanding why parents who “don’t believe in spanking” continue to do so. These myths also undermine the ability of professionals who advise parents to do what is needed to end corporal punishment.
Paradox 2: Being Opposed to Spanking but Failing to Say Never Spank or Even Don’t Spank

Many pediatricians, developmental psychologists, and parent educators are now opposed to corporal punishment, at least in principle. But, like the Director of Child Protection at Boston Children’s Hospital, quoted in Chapter 1, and the director of an organization devoted to ending corporal punishment in schools, cited in the new Preface, most also continue to believe that there may be a situation where spanking by parents is necessary or acceptable. This is based on the cultural myths that spanking works when other things do not (see Chapter 10, Myth 1) and that “mild” corporal punishment is harmless (Myth 3). All but a small minority of parents and professionals continue to believe these myths despite the experimental and other evidence showing that other disciplinary strategies work just as well as spanking, even in the short run (Larzelere et al., 1998; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, and Pike, 1996; Roberts, 1988; Roberts and Powers, 1990), and are more effective in the long run as shown by the first four of the studies described earlier in this chapter. Consequently, when I suggest to pediatricians, parent educators, or social scientists that it is essential to tell parents that they should never spank or use any other type of corporal punishment, that idea has been rejected with rare exception. Some, like one of America’s leading developmental psychologists, object because of the unproven belief that it would turn off parents. Some object on the false belief that it could be harmful because parents don’t know what else to do (see Myths 5, 9, and 10). They argue for a “positive approach” by which they mean teaching parents alternative disciplinary strategies, as compared to what they call the “negative approach” of advising to never spank. As a result, the typical pattern is to say nothing about spanking. Fortunately, that is slowly changing. Although they are still the exception, an increasing number of books for parents, parent education programs, and guidelines for professionals advise no-spanking.

Both the movement away from spanking and an important limitation of that movement are illustrated by Publication of the “Guidelines for Effective Discipline” of the American Academy of Pediatrics (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998). This was an important step forward, but it also reflects the same problem. It recommends that parents avoid corporal punishment. However, it
also carefully avoids saying that parents should never spank. This may seem like splitting hairs, but because of the typical sequence of parent-child interaction that eventuates in corporal punishment described in the next section, it is a major obstacle to ending corporal punishment. Omitting a never-spank message is a serious obstacle because, in the absence of a commitment to never-spank, even parents who are against spanking continue to spank. It is important to understand what underlies the paradox of parents who are opposed to spanking, nonetheless spanking.

Paradox 3: Why Failing to Be Explicit about Never Spanking Results in Everyone Spanking

This paradoxical situation reflects a combination of needing to cope with the typical behavior of toddlers and perceiving those behaviors through the lens of the myth that spanking works when other things do not.

When a toddler is corrected for a misbehavior (such as hitting another child or disobeying), the "recidivism" rate is about 80 percent within the same day and about 50 percent within two hours. For some children, it is within two minutes (Larzelere et al., 1998; Larzelere, Schneider, Larson, and Pike, 1996). Moreover, Larzelere (who is a defender of corporal punishment) found that these "time to failure" rates apply equally to corporal punishment and to other disciplinary strategies. Consequently, on any given day, a parent is almost certain to find that so-called alternative disciplinary strategies such as explaining, deprivation of privileges, and time out, "do not work." When that happens, they turn to spanking. So, as pointed out previously, just about everyone (at least 94 percent) spanks toddlers.

The difference between spanking and other disciplinary strategies is that, when spanking does not work, parents do not question its effectiveness. The idea that spanking works when other methods do not is so ingrained in American culture that, when the child repeats the misbehavior an hour or two later (or sometimes a few minutes later) parents fail to perceive that spanking has the same high failure rate as other modes of discipline. So they spank again, and for as many times as it takes to ultimately secure compliance. That is the correct strategy because, with consistency and perseverance, the child will eventually learn. What so many parents miss is that it is also the correct strategy for non-spanking
methods. Thus, unless there is an absolute prohibition on spanking, parents will “see with their own eyes” that alternatives do not work and continue to find it is necessary to spank.

“Never-Spank” Must Be the Message

Because of the typical behavior of toddlers and the almost inevitable information processing errors just described, teaching alternative disciplinary techniques by itself is not sufficient. There must also be an unambiguous “never-spank” message to increase the chances that parents who disapprove of spanking will act on their beliefs. Consequently, it is essential for pediatricians and others who advise parents to abandon their reluctance to say “never-spank.” To achieve this, parent-educators must themselves be educated. They need to understand why, what they now consider a “negative approach,” is such an important part of ending use of corporal punishment. Moreover, because they believe that a “negative approach” does not work, they also need to know about the experience of Sweden. The Swedish experience shows that, contrary to the currently prevailing opinion, a never-spank approach has worked (Durrant, 1999).

In short, the first priority step to end or reduce spanking may be to educate professionals who advise parents. Once professionals are ready to move, the key steps are relatively easy to implement and inexpensive.

- Parent-education programs, such as STEP, which are now silent on spanking, can be revised to include the evidence that spanking does not work better than other disciplinary tactics, even in the short run; and to specifically say “never spank.”

- The Public Health Service can follow the Swedish model and sponsor no-spanking public service announcements on TV and on milk cartons.

- There can be a “No-Spanking” poster and pamphlets in every pediatrician’s office and every maternity ward.

- There can be a notice on birth certificates such as:

WARNING: SPANKING HAS BEEN DETERMINED TO BE DANGEROUS TO THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF YOUR CHILD—
DO NOT EVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SPANK OR HIT YOUR CHILD

Until professionals who advise parents start advising parents to never spank, the paradox of parents becoming less and less favorable to spanking while at the same time continuing to spank toddlers will continue. Fortunately, that is starting to happen.

Benefits to Children and Society of Ending Corporal Punishment

The benefits of avoiding corporal punishment are many, but they are virtually impossible for parents to perceive by observing their children. The situation with spanking is parallel to that of smoking. Smokers could perceive the short run satisfaction from a cigarette, but had no way to see the adverse health consequences down the road. Similarly, parents can perceive the beneficial effects of a slap (and, for the reasons explained in the previous section, fail to see the equal effectiveness of alternatives), they have no way of looking a year or more into the future to see if there is a harmful side effect of having hit their child to correct misbehavior. The only way parents can know this would be if there were a public policy to publicize the results of research such as the studies summarized in this chapter.

Another reason the benefits of avoiding spanking are difficult to see is that they are not dramatic in any one case. This is illustrated by the average increase of 2 to 5 points in mental ability associated with no-corporal punishment. An increase of that size would hardly be noticed in an individual case. However, it is a well established principle in public health and epidemiology that a widely prevalent risk factor with small effect size, for example spanking, can have a much greater impact on public health than a risk factor with a large effect size, but low prevalence, for example, physical abuse (Cohen, 1996; Rose, 1985; Rosenthal, 1984). For example, assume that: (1) 50 million US children experienced corporal punishment and 1 million experienced physical abuse. (2) The probability of being depressed as an adult is increased by 2 percent for children who experienced corporal punishment and by 25 percent for children who experienced physical abuse. Given these assumptions, the additional cases of depression caused by corporal punishment is 1.02 times 50 million,
or 1 million. The additional cases of depression caused by physical abuse are 1.25 times 1 million, or 250,000. Thus corporal punishment is associated with a four times greater increase in depression than is physical abuse.

Another example of a major benefit resulting from reducing a risk factor that has a small effect, but for a large proportion of the population, may be the increase in scores on intelligence tests that has been occurring worldwide (Neisser, 1997). Corporal punishment has also been decreasing worldwide. The decrease in use of corporal punishment and the increase in scores on IQ tests could be just a coincidence. However, the results of the study described earlier in this chapter which showed that less spanking is associated with faster cognitive development suggest that the trend away from corporal punishment may be one of a number of social changes (especially, better educated parents) that explain the increase in IQ scores in so many nations.

The other four prospective studies reviewed in this chapter, together with the studies in Part II, show that ending corporal punishment is likely to also reduce juvenile violence, wife-beating, and masochistic sex, and increase the probability of completing higher education (Straus and Mathur, 1995), holding a high income job, and lower rates of depression and alcohol abuse (see Chapter 5 and Straus and Kaufman Kantor, 1994). Those are not only humanitarian benefits, they can also result in huge monetary savings in public and private costs for dealing with mental health problems, school problems, marital and family problems, and crime.

Chart 12–5 estimates how much could be gained if corporal punishment were ended. However, the reduction in social and psychological problem behaviors would not be as large as those in Chart 12–5. One reason is that Chart 12–5 compares the experience of no-corporal punishment with the experience of a high frequency of corporal punishment. These extremes are a large group in absolute numbers but, because they are a relatively small part of the total population, the degree to which problems are reduced will be less for those who experienced more typical amounts of corporal punishment. Consequently, after averaging in those smaller reductions, the overall decrease in human problems will be less than suggested by Chart 12–5, but would still represent an important reduction in human suffering and in problems for society.
CHART 12-5. How much could ending corporal punishment decrease psychological and social problems?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CORPORAL PUNISHMENT</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
<th>NONE</th>
<th>CHANGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. CHILD BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeatedly and severely attacked a sibling in previous 12 months (p.102)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>55% LESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times hit other children in school in two week period (mean) (Strassberg et al. 1994)</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>51% LESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less rapid growth in mental ability in 4 years (children age 2-4 in year 1)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>+5.5</td>
<td>5.5% LESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(p. 203)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less rapid growth in mental ability in 4 years (children age 5-9 in year 1)</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
<td>2.6% LESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile delinquency in past 12 months (p. 108; see also Straus et al., 1997)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>80% LESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms of psychological distress (mean) (Turner &amp; Finkelhor, 1994)</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>34% LESS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **B. ADULT PROBLEMS** |      |      |        |
| Graduate from college (Straus & Mathur, 1995) | 15%  | 22%  | 47% MORE |
| Seriously depressed (90th percentile) (p.74; see also Durant, 1995) | 13%  | 7%   | 46% LESS |
| Hit spouse in previous 12 months (p.104; see also Simons et al., 1998) | 25%  | 8%   | 68% LESS |
| Physically abused own child in past 12 months (i.e. went beyond legal corporal punishment) (p.94) | 24%  | 8%   | 67% LESS |

**NOTE:** Page references are to this book unless a different author is indicated.
The final words of the original concluding chapter (Chapter 11) were that ending corporal punishment by parents "portends profound and far reaching benefits for humanity." The new research summarized in this chapter now makes those words even more appropriate. We can look forward to the day when children in almost all countries have the benefit of being brought up without being hit by their parents; and just as important, to the day when many nations have the benefit of the healthier, wealthier, and wiser citizens who were brought up free from the violence that is now a part of their earliest and most influential life experiences.
BEATING THE DEVIL OUT OF THEM: 
Corporal Punishment in American Families 
and its Effects on Children 

Murray A. Straus 
with Denise A. Donnelly

With a new introduction by the author

Based on his studies of over 9,000 families, Murray A. Straus, the foremost researcher on family violence in the world, discusses the extent to which parents in the United States use corporal punishment (such as spanking and slapping) and its effects on their children. The question of whether corporal punishment is an effective method of discipline is hotly debated. Straus contends that this believed-to-be-"minor" form of physical violence is a precursor to much of the violence that plagues our world.

Children who are spanked quickly learn that love and violence can go hand in hand. Since spanking is generally done by loving, caring parents— for the child's own good—a child can learn that hitting is "morally right.

Straus describes what he has learned through two decades of research: children who are spanked are from two to six times more likely to be physically aggressive, to become juvenile delinquents, and later, as adults, to use physical violence against their spouses, to have sadomasochistic tendencies, and to suffer from depression. Straus alerts parents to these risks, and argues that spanking adversely affects not only the children who are subjected to it but society as a whole.

This groundbreaking book, now available in paperback with a substantive new introduction and new concluding chapter, is essential reading for parents as well as teachers, lawyers, and judges. Professionals in fields such as social work, child protection, delinquency and criminology, psychology, and politics will find it of critical importance.

"A comprehensive expose of the corporal punishment controversy by an eminent scholar. Straus provides the long needed scientific evidence linking corporal punishment to subsequent violence and other adult problems. This book gives major new importance and credibility to the uphill effort to end corporal punishment of children."—Adrienne Ahlgren Hauser, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

"Murray Straus has exposed 'the best kept secret of American child psychology': hitting kids is the dark force in family life. Just as smoking was accepted a generation ago, corporal punishment is still okay in polite society. However, like smoking, hitting emerges as a destructive anti-social act with serious costs to public health."—James Garbarino, Cornell University

About the Author

Murray A. Straus is founder and co-director of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire. He is the co-author of Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families, also available from Transaction.

Library of Congress: 00-059930
Printed in the U.S.A.
Cover design by Jeremy Rech

ISBN: 0-7658-0754-8