

## 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

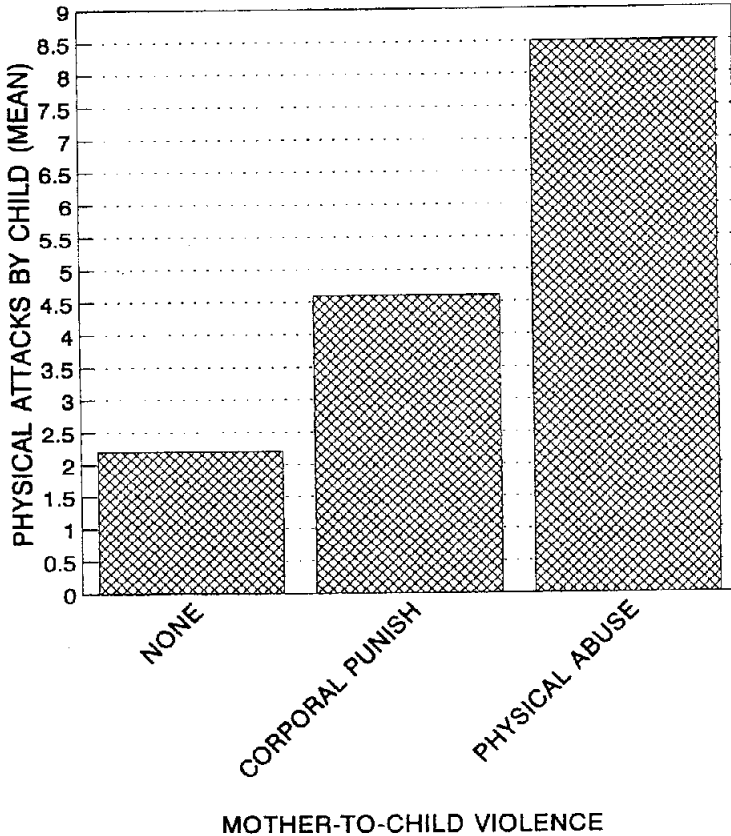
in Chapter 10 about this myth: that no-corporal punishment does not mean no-discipline. Writers and organizations leading the movement away from corporal punishment believe that rules and discipline are necessary, but that they will be more effective without corporal punishment. Their goal is to inform 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**



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

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.

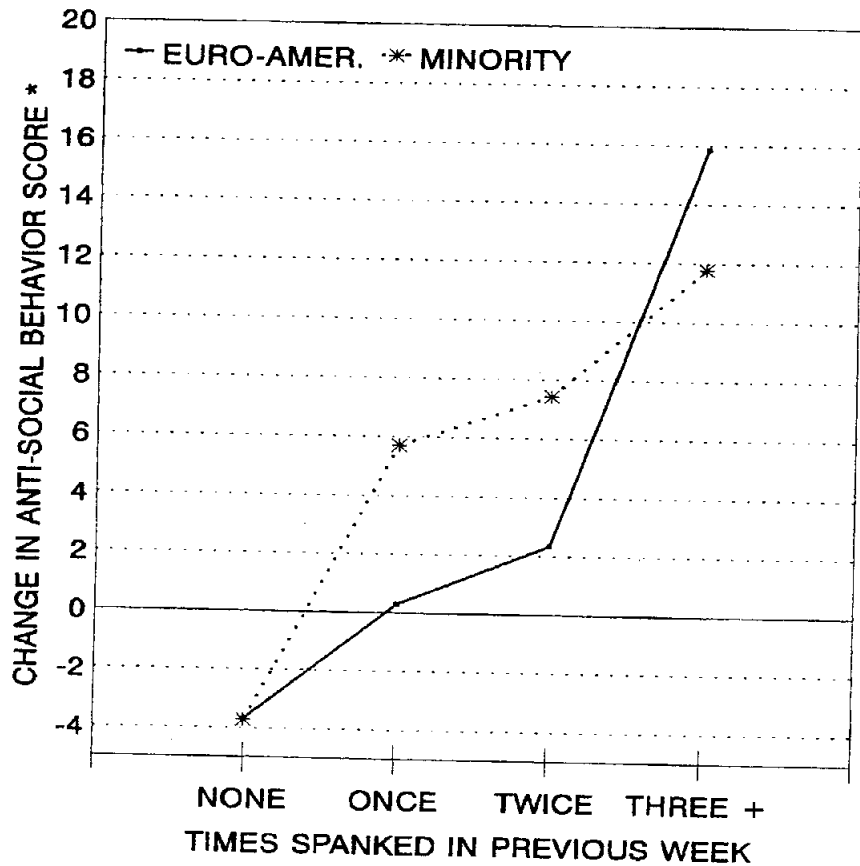
*Other Variables.* We also took into account several other variables that could affect antisocial behavior by the child. These include the sex of child, cognitive stimulation provided by the parents, emotional support by the mother, ethnic group of the mother, and socioeconomic status of the family.

*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.* Gunnoe and Mariner (1997a) 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 sex.

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.

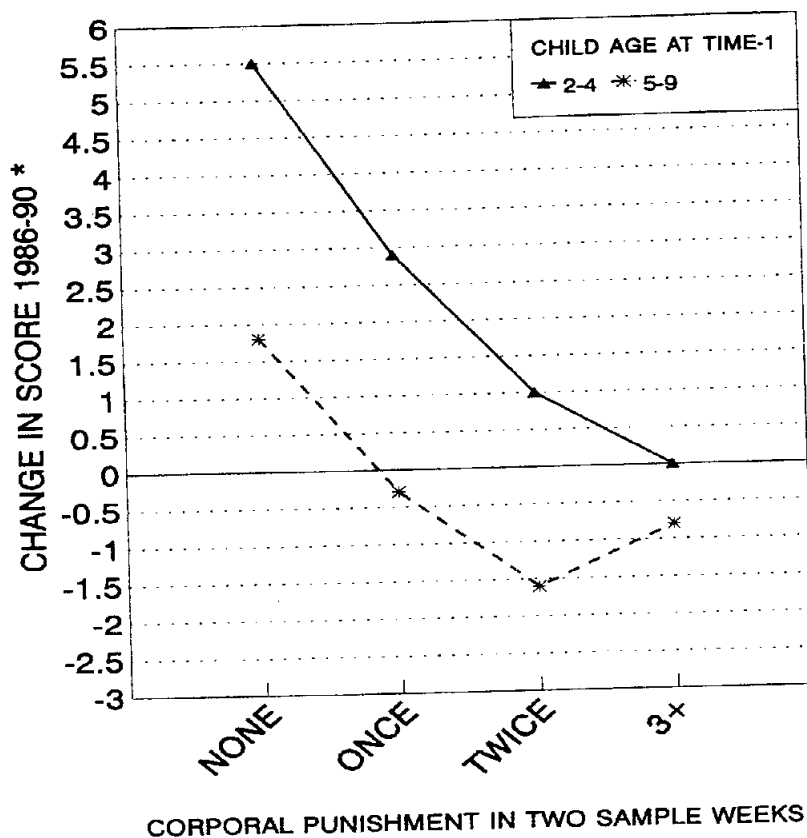
This theory was tested on 806 children of mothers in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth who were age 2 to 4 in the first year of our analysis, and the tests were repeated for an additional 704 children who were age 5 to 9 in the first year. Corporal punishment was measured by whether the mother was observed hitting the child during the interview and by a question on frequency of spanking 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.**



\* 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.

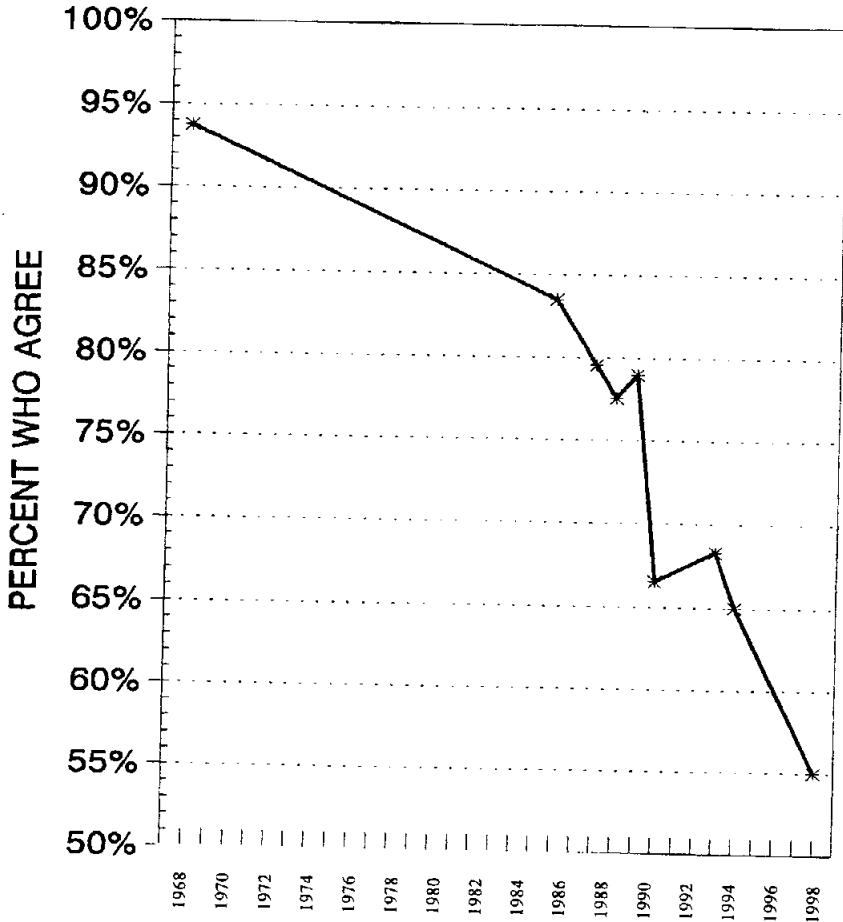
#### *The Trend Away From Corporal Punishment Continues*

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.



Updated for 1995 and 1999 from Straus & Mathur, 1996.

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) spansks 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?**

	<b>CORPORAL PUNISHMENT</b>		
	<b>HIGH</b>	<b>NONE</b>	<b>CHANGE</b>
<b>A. CHILD BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS</b>			
REPEATEDLY AND SEVERELY ATTACKED A SIBLING IN PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS (p.102)	40%	18%	55% LESS
NUMBER OF TIMES HIT OTHER CHILDREN IN SCHOOL IN TWO WEEK PERIOD (MEAN) (Strassberg et al. 1994)	4.3	2.1	51 % LESS
LESS RAPID GROWTH IN MENTAL ABILITY IN 4 YEARS			
CHILDREN AGE 2-4 IN YEAR 1	0.0	+5.5	5.5% LESS
CHILDREN AGE 5-9 IN YEAR 1 (p. 203)	-0.8	+1.8	2.6% LESS
JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN PAST 12 MONTHS (p. 108; see also Straus et al., 1997)	15%	3%	80% LESS
SYMPTOMS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS (MEAN) (Turner& Finkelhor, 1994)	.99	.65	34% LESS
<b>B. ADULT PROBLEMS</b>			
GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE (Straus & Mathur, 1 995)	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.

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