An Interview With Murray Straus

“We can diminish family violence if churches get involved. When was the last time you heard a sermon saying that spanking is violence and we should stop bringing up our kids violently?”

MURRAY STRAUS is the world’s preeminent family violence researcher. He can be credited with organizing the field after the initial impetus provided by medical research on child abuse. He is currently Professor of Sociology and Codirector of the interdisciplinary Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. He has authored or coauthored over 200 articles and 15 books related to the family. An early and significant book, published in 1980 and coauthored with Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz, is Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family. His latest book is Beating the Devil out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families (1994). He has served as President of several professional organizations, such as the National Council on Family Relations, and has received one prestigious honor after another, including the 1992 Distinguished Contribution Award from the New Hampshire Psychological Association. Dr. Straus received both his B.A. in international relations and his Ph.D. in sociology (1956) from the University of Wisconsin.

Q: What sparked your interest in family violence?
A: It was the old scientific principle: If you come across something interesting, drop everything else and study it. In my case, it was the discovery in 1979 that one quarter of my students had been hit by their parents during their senior year in high school, and another quarter had been threatened with being hit. Somehow, it clicked with me that this kind of parental violence might be one of the roots of the violence that came to national attention during the Vietnam War era, a period of riots and assassinations, and the rising murder rate.

Q: Why did your work meet with such wide acceptance?
A: I think it was because my research on wife beating coincided with the establishment of battered women’s shelters. They needed data on how pervasive the problem was, and our National Family Violence Surveys provided the statistics. A major accomplishment of the shelter movement was to create consciousness of and concern about wife beating.

Q: What has been your most influential article in the field?
A: The article on the Conflict Tactics Scales [CTS]. The CTS was a technological breakthrough. Up until then, psychologists and sociologists tended to think that they had to rely on official statistics or case studies to get data on family violence. The CTS showed that it was possible to get valid data from questionnaires in an ordinary clinical or research interview.

Q: What is your current research focus?
A: After more than 20 years of studying wife beating, I returned to just where I started in family violence 27 years ago—research on spanking and other legal forms of corporal punishment. I’m also developing new measures for use in family violence research. We have just finished a major revision of the CTS, and we are well along on developing another test. It is going to be called the Violence Risk Marker Inventory.

Q: What would you like to do if you had a large grant?
A: I would do a community experiment on corporal punishment. Corporal punishment will take a long time to end if we deal only with parents. Convincing them that they are more likely to have well-behaved children if they never spank tends to get undone when the inevitable misbehaviors occur and their friends and relatives say that what that child needs is a good spanking. So we have to
change the culture of communities before parents will feel free to bring up children without violence.

Q: What research would you like to see others undertake?
A: I think it is important to study violence by women against their partners. Almost everyone is afraid to deal with this issue despite data showing that women strike out physically against their partners as often as do men, and they also hit first just as often as men. My concern with the issue is partly because I think the evidence is clear that when women engage in what they call "harmless" violence, it is not. True, the man is rarely harmed, but it tremendously increases the risk that the woman will be.

Q: What social institutions must get involved to end family violence?
A: Unless churches get involved, things are going to progress much more slowly. When was the last time you heard a sermon saying that spanking is violence and we should stop bringing up our kids violently?