

Parenting Without Punishment: A Humanist Perspective, Part 1

What are the many things wrong with punishment?—Corporal *and* Non-Corporal



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Source: Is Spanking Child Abuse? mdalegal, used with permission

However exasperating a child's behavior may be, it's still—in most instances—age-appropriate. More than anything else, children's limited ability to overrule their impulses is what distinguishes them from adults. So when they misbehave (according, that is, to grown-up standards), they're prompted to do so primarily because of powerful forces in them that they lack the cognitive development to subdue.

If, then, it's unreasonable to blame children for behaviors not yet sufficiently under their control, what's the best way for parents to correct these errant words or acts? For if we're to help our children mature into responsible adults, we really can't accept that much defiant or destructive behavior. We need to teach them how to restrain their self-indulgent instincts and relate harmoniously to others. After all, we have a duty to properly socialize our children: to raise them in a way that will assist them in growing up not only to be successful, happy, and self-disciplined, but to be respectful, sensitive, and nurturing to others.

Parenting today—at least, non-humanist parenting—continues to focus on aggressive, punitive measures for altering children's unacceptable behaviors. True, there are various *forms* of punishment, some much harsher than others. And corporal punishment

is probably the most onerous of these parental options. Yet it's hardly worse than the equally shaming—and scary—"silent treatment," which to a child is experienced as abandonment, for it involves the complete withdrawal of parental love, connection, succor and support. In a word, it can be felt by them as a mortal threat to their parental *bond*.

This three-part post will focus on the many serious problems with physical (or corporal) punishment and enumerate what's wrong—both ethically and pragmatically—with this severe approach to correcting children's misdeeds. It will also touch on some non-physical forms of punishment, suggesting why this alternative isn't really an ideal solution either. Next (part 2), it will highlight what all children require if they're to emerge as healthy, contented, and responsible adults—as well as furnish a list of which more positive, contemporary modes of altering a child's misbehavior are most effective. Finally (part 3), this post will provide a substantial list of resources for further reading, many of which are readily available on the Web.

What's Wrong with Corporal Punishment

At this point, the scientific evidence against disciplining a child physically is indisputable. Decades of research on the subject have documented its negative—at times, disastrous—short and longer-term consequences on their development. And not only is hitting a helpless, dependent child ethically questionable, it's also repeatedly been shown to be counter-productive. It's harmful to a child's sense of self and, however inadvertently, teaches the child all the wrong things (e.g., "might makes right"). Undoubtedly, in the moment it can shut down, or suppress, the behavior that the parent(s) finds objectionable. But beyond that, the damage it inflicts on the child—and, ultimately, on society—is prodigious.

That's why it's so regrettable that although in America meting out pain on one's children has definitely declined since the 1960s, recent surveys reveal that about two-thirds of parents still approve of the practice. And this holds true even though the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Children in 2006 issued a directive designating corporal punishment as "legalized violence against children" that should be barred in *all* settings through "legislative, administrative, social and educational measures." This "treaty," ratified by no fewer than 192 countries, was unable to get the support of Somalia and

(sadly) the U.S. And, additionally, it might be noted that over 30 countries have banned outright as abusive the physical discipline of children.

To elaborate on the above, scientific studies on a subject unfortunately still controversial in the U.S. have found that physical violence regularly inflicted on children:

- **Harms children's brains.** It compromises brain growth and actually lowers I.Q. It's associated both with cognitive impairment and degraded academic performance, and with long-term developmental problems. It can also affect areas of the brain related to stress and emotional regulation.
- **Leads to increased aggression.** In school, it's correlated to higher levels of disruptive, or destructive, acting out—a finding demonstrated as true across cultures and ethnicities (i.e., it appears universal).
- **Increases the probability of depression, on the one hand, and anti-social behavior, on the other.** That is, especially in girls, it's tied to greater vulnerability to depression and, in boys, to significantly greater tendencies toward sociopathy.
- **Typically fails to reduce misbehavior.** And this is true, even though—through intimidation—it immediately suppresses it. But, exposing its ultimate ineffectuality, it decreases *longer-term* compliance.
- **Fails to provide adequate guidance on how the child *should* behave.** Because its focus isn't educational but retributive, such physical discipline gives the child little opportunity to learn, practice, and *internalize* positive alternatives to the behavior the parents reject.
- **Can cause longstanding emotional injury.** And this damage not only interferes with new and more adaptive learning but has been linked to various mental disorders.
- **Seriously undermines children's relationship to—and particularly trust in—their parent(s).** And it can also breed a hostility toward authority figures in general—especially with teachers, because of the broad power differential between them. Further, because of the child's inability to stand up to the abuse done to them, they can develop a generalized sense of powerlessness. Not feeling safe enough to be open and

vulnerable, they're likely to become self-protective, which later in life compromises their capacity for relational intimacy.

- **Reduces compassion for others, and for themselves.** Their parents, lacking in forbearance and empathy, actually *teach* them through repeated modeling that to be physically—and verbally—violent is an acceptable way of dealing with frustration. Regularly subject to such parental aggression increases the likelihood that it will become their own “default” reaction to any sort of disappointment (one reason that physical punishment tends to be multi-generational).

- **Interferes with the normal development of social intelligence and insight.** The parents' inability to control their anger—much of which is “left over” from *their* childhood—usually renders them incapable of imparting to the child the crucial knowledge and skills needed for the child to interact effectively with others. (It's generally recognized, for example, that bullies usually have “adult bullies” as their parents.)

- **Fosters lying behaviors.** Depending on the punishment's severity, children may feel desperate to avert future violence toward themselves by disguising, or otherwise being untruthful about, their behavior. After all, they've been taught that honesty may be much more hazardous to them than some convenient fabrication. Lying, then, can become entrenched as a tactic for adapting to their punitive family—and is apt to characterize their behavior long after they've left it.

- **Is correlated with later-day drug and alcohol abuse.** Addicts generally become addicts in the first place because of the deeply felt need to alter their mood or state of mind. As children victimized by corporal punishment, they typically don't have a very positive regard for themselves. And so they experience a powerful—at times, overwhelming—urge to escape from such distressful self-dislike (or even -contempt) through any substance able to numb this emotional pain.

- **Induces fear rather than learning or understanding.** Physical punishment doesn't contribute to, and can in fact obstruct, the normal development of awareness, insight, and self-control. Researchers regularly point out that in a state of elevated anxiety or fear, the only learning that can take place is how in the future to *avoid* anything linked to this fear.

Non-Corporal Forms of Punishment Aren't the Answer Either



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Non-physical means of disciplining a child are obviously more civilized, or evolved, than physical measures, and so preferable to them. But if they're still aggressive, they, too, can have significant negative repercussions on a child's mental and emotional development. Whether it's incessant nagging, manipulating, yelling, reprimanding, insulting, threatening, or shaming—which is to say, psychologically overpowering or humiliating for the child—such *verbal* reactions to children's misbehavior can eventuate in scarring similarly harmful to their healthy growth. And the strongly adverse effects of such “complementary” abuse can stay with them indefinitely.

Much less harmful measures for correcting a child's disobedience include time-outs and consequences established, unilaterally, by their parents. These alternative ways of disciplining a child (punishment-lite, as it were) to prompt them to better learn how to discipline themselves represent a major step toward humanist parenting. And doubtless, they're milder, more humane forms of punishment. They're also much less degrading and anxiety-producing. For, at least as generally recommended, they're (1) carried out dispassionately (so less upsetting to the child), (2) more commensurate with the unacceptable behavior, and (3) more respectful of the child in letting them know in advance which specific behaviors will result in which penalty (or negative reinforcement), so when a child violates a clearly specified rule, they learn, in effect, that it's *they* who are inflicting the punishment on themselves.

That said, however, these disciplinary methods are still punishing. The child still receives the message that their behavior is not just wrong but bad. And very young children may not be able to distinguish between their behavior's being bad and *their* being bad. But if, given their limited internal resources to manage their impulses, a child's “inappropriate” behavior is, however ironically, appropriate *for them*, do they really deserve to be getting such an unfavorable message about themselves?

Ideally—though, in reality, sometimes quite challenging to carry out—more humanistically inclined parents teach their children what they need to learn *without* having to punish them. They can help the child determine how it's not only fair but also shows good judgment to comply with (reasonable) parental demands. And, too, how they can get along better with others (i.e., more cooperatively vs. competitively or aggressively), how to take better care of themselves, and so on. There's no sufficiently compelling evidence to conclude that such benevolent childhood education cannot happen in the absence of routinely inflicting "instructional punishment" on them. And even the more humane varieties of punishment are most accurately understood as either penalizing the child or taking things away from them that they're attached to.

Obviously, parents can't deny having authority over their children, and they'd be remiss if they didn't at times exert it. But to "pull rank" and trumpet superiority over the child is, gratuitously, to behave disrespectfully toward them. And the cardinal principle of all humanistically oriented parenting is to treat children in a way that avoids compromising their fundamental—and rightful—sense of dignity and worth.

Note 1: [Part 2](#) will delineate what's universal in what kids need from their parents, and [Part 3](#) will offer a detailed lists of resources for further reading on this so-important topic.

Note 2: For anyone interested in reading an interview of me as a humanist psychologist, click [here](#) ([link is external](#)). If, additionally, you'd like to check out other articles I've written for *Psychology Today* online—on a large variety of psychological topics—also click [here](#).

Note 3: If you found this piece illuminating, and believe others you know might also, kindly consider sending them its link.

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