

---



# Family Issues Facts

---

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

---

## Spanking

Bulletin #4357

### Why Stop Spanking?

Numerous recent studies have shown that spanking children is not an effective way to control behavior. Spanking does not stop misbehavior. Spanking doesn't work for several reasons:

- it doesn't teach children self-control or what to do instead
- it becomes less effective over time
- it has long-term, harmful side effects.

*Spanking is not harmless.*

One reason why almost everyone overestimates the effectiveness of spanking is that we have "selective inattention." We simply do not remember when spanking fails, as it does most of the time, because it contradicts what we want to believe. Partly this is because our culture believes spanking is "normal" and partly because many of us were spanked as children. It is difficult for us as adults to relate our adult problems to childhood spanking



or to condemn our parents.

Spanking is not harmless. Many of the harmful side effects of spanking do not show up for several years. In addition, only a small percentage of spanked children experience *visually* harmful effects. Even infrequent spanking can harm a child's self-esteem. The most harmful effects include an increased risk of delinquency as a child. The long-term adult effects show up as higher frequencies of crime,

spouse abuse, depression, and lower earnings.

Spanking also teaches a child they are a "victim." The more a child is victimized, the more he or she develops a perception of him/herself as someone who "deserves"



discomfort and suffering. People who view themselves as victims behave in ways that keep them suffering. They make “choices” that repeat the relationships between themselves and their parents. Rejection of pain, suppressed anger, low self-worth, inability to form lasting relationships, and uncontrolled fits of violent anger, are just some of the consequences of childhood victimization. It is not surprising many children who view themselves as victims engage parents and other adults in power struggles, push the limits of reasonable control, test the boundaries, act on the “you can’t make me” philosophy of cooperation, and challenge adult authority until they are victimized again.

Childhood victimization often leads to adult authoritarianism — obsession with order, control and obedience. Both submission to and rebelliousness against authority characterize authoritarianism. It is rooted in violence and coercion. Authoritarianism is usually a form of “order” that is actually a reaction to the hurtful violence that children who are spanked

Such efforts at control usually do not achieve the desired order in the long run. The impulses that create authoritarian personalities create violent, aggressive and antisocial feelings and behaviors

that seriously impair the trust and respect that are the core of healthy relationships.

Once a child is hit, the memory remains in the brain and body for life. Children who were spanked only once or twice can often remember the pain and shock for years afterward. For children struck frequently, the anticipation of intense pain becomes part of the punishment itself. The anxiety this creates cannot be easily overcome. Recent brain research indicates that high levels of stress or anxiety can actually change the “wiring” of the brain and interfere with learning, thinking

spanking. Anger is a child’s best, and sometimes only, defense. It comes from a powerful and healthy sense of self that is being violated and abused by physical blows or hurtful words. Often, a

child will respond with hatred and a powerful desire for revenge. These painful memories are permanently stored in the brain and influence us throughout our lives. When these memories are ignored or forgotten, they are more dangerous than when they are felt and acknowledged.

Another consequence of physical punishment is a limited ability to show compassion and empathy for oneself and others. Apathy and passive modes of aggression are also frequent consequences, all of which contribute to increased chances of depression and suicide. Buried anger is at the core of self-aggression, the most common form of which is depression. Depression is often a delayed response to the suppression of childhood anger that is usually the result of being physically or verbally hurt by adults whom the child loves and on whom the child depends for nurturance and life itself.

Over time, spanking actually makes parenting more difficult because it reduces the ability of parents to influence children, especially in adolescence. Children are more likely to do what

*Over time, spanking actually makes parenting more difficult because it reduces the ability of parents to influence children, especially in adolescence.*

*Depression is often a delayed response to the suppression of childhood anger that is usually the result of being physically or verbally hurt by adults whom the child loves and on whom the child depends for nurturance and life itself.*

experience, and the rage and hatred that violence creates. Authoritarianism is “order” built upon coercion (i.e., threats, bullying and verbal attacks) rather than consent, upon alienation rather than empathy and love for oneself and for others.

and later relationships. This damaging anxiety can also be caused by watching a parent strike another child or by viewing violence on television.

Understanding a child’s anger at being hit is central to understanding the impact of

parents want when there is a strong bond of affection and trust with the parent. Spanking chips away at this important bond.

Many parents believe that if they don't spank, children will

believe they need to prepare their children for the violence-filled "real" world by "toughening them up." So, parents hit children at home to prepare them for the violent world they live in. However,

*Children of non-spanking parents tend to be easy to manage and well-behaved because these parents set clear standards for what is expected, provide lots of love and affection, explain things to the child, and recognize and reward good behavior.*

run wild and be uncontrollable. The alternative to spanking isn't to ignore misbehavior or to replace spanking with verbal attacks. Many parents already know and use other, non-violent ways of teaching and controlling behavior. In most cases, parents only need the patience to keep on doing what they were doing to correct misbehavior — without the spanking!

Children of non-spanking parents tend to be easy to manage and well-behaved because these parents set clear standards for what is expected, provide lots of love and affection, explain things to the child, and recognize and reward good behavior. Non-spanking parents also pay more attention to their children's behavior, both good and bad, than parents who spank do.

Contrary to myth, most parents who spank tend to use it for almost any misbehavior. Many parents spank before trying other methods. Daily spanking is not uncommon, and parents who spank often don't realize how often they are hitting their children.

Because violence is so common in our culture, many parents

violence in the home is transmitted to the neighborhood. The "real world" would become less violent if violence in the home stopped.

One of the biggest myths about spanking is that it is unrealistic to expect parents to never spank. It is no more unrealistic to expect parents to never hit a child than to expect that men should never hit women. A law prohibiting spanking is unrealistic only because spanking is such an accepted part of American culture.

*Prepared by Judith Graham,  
Extension Human Development  
Specialist*

**Sources:**

- Bavolek, S. *Red, White & Bruises: Spanking in the U.S.A.* Park City, UT: Family Development Resources, Inc.
- Greven, P. (1990). *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse.* New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Straus, M. A. (1994). *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families.* New York, NY: Lexington Books.

## Red, White and Bruises

Stephen Bavolek states that the role of discipline is to promote "self-control and lasting inner commitment to be a disciplined person. Discipline cannot be forced on another person. Any discipline worth acquiring cannot be beaten into anyone..." His research indicates that hitting teaches children "fear, poor self-concept, feelings of revenge, and the idea that it's okay to hit those you love." Even threatening children with harm as a way of controlling behavior can be as detrimental as hitting itself. Children who have been repeatedly threatened or hit:

- Develop low self-worth
- Fear adults
- Feel unloved and unwanted
- Exhibit a high degree of anxiety
- Struggle with feelings of helplessness
- Seek revenge against others
- Destroy property and break things belonging to others
- Tend to be more aggressive
- Learn hitting is a way to deal with anger and frustration

Bavolek, S. *Red, White & Bruises: Spanking in the U.S.A.* Park City, UT: Family Development Resources, Inc., p. 7.

For more information on family issues,  
contact your county Extension office or the  
University of Maine Cooperative Extension  
Family Living Office,  
5717 Corbett Hall, Orono, ME 04469-5717  
**(207) 581-3448/3104 or 1-800-287-0274.**

*A Member of the University of Maine System*

Published and distributed in furtherance of Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, the Land Grant University of the state of Maine and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Cooperative Extension and other agencies of the U.S.D.A. provide equal opportunities in programs and employment. 1/01