

Corporal Punishment

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) strongly opposes the use of corporal punishment in schools and supports ending its use in all schools. Furthermore, NASP resolves to educate the public about the deleterious effects of corporal punishment through research and dissemination of information about its negative impact, including the short- and long-term psychological and physical harm on children and adolescents. NASP supports and encourages alternative disciplinary and behavior management strategies.

CONTEXT AND USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Corporal punishment of students is the intentional infliction of pain or discomfort or the use of physical force upon a student with the intention of causing the student to experience bodily pain to punish the student's behavior (Bitensky, 2008). In the United States, a common form of corporal punishment in schools has been striking a student's buttocks with a wooden paddle by a school authority because it is believed that the student has disobeyed a rule (Gershoff & Font, 2016). An increasing number of countries have banned corporal punishment in schools (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010); however, the United States still does not have a national policy concerning corporal punishment (Gershoff & Font, 2016) and instead delegates decisions regarding its use to state legislatures. In contrast, the use of physical punishment has been entirely banned in prisons and mental health institutions (Andero & Stewart, 2002).

The use of corporal punishment is a social justice issue, as students are more likely to experience corporal punishment if they are poor, male, ethnically minoritized, live within specific regions of the country (Gershoff & Font, 2016; Owen, 2005; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003), or have an identified disability (Gershoff & Font, 2016; Rollins, 2012). Four states (i.e., Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, Georgia) account for more than 50% of all incidences of corporal punishment in schools (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019).

According to a U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO; 2018) analysis of U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (CRDC) 2013–2014 data, there were approximately 110,000 K–12 public school students who received corporal punishment. Black students consistently experience a disproportionate rate of corporal punishment. For example, they were on the receiving end of 30% of the CRDC reported corporal punishment instances, yet they comprise only 16% of public school students (U.S. Department of Education CRDC data, 2013–2014). MacSuga-Gage et al. (2020) examined U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights 2015–2016 data, and found disproportionate rates of corporal punishment among Black students and those with disabilities. The United States Department of Education (U.S. Secretary of Education, 2016) indicated that in states where corporal punishment is used, relative to their White counterparts, Black boys were 1.8 times more likely and Black girls were 2.9 times more likely to experience corporal punishment. In 2016, based on these alarming statistics, the U.S. Secretary of Education decried the use of corporal

punishment and called on states to ban its use in schools, calling for more effective and proactive means of school discipline (U.S. Secretary of Education, 2016).

Between the 1980s and the mid-1990s, the use of corporal punishment in U.S. schools declined rapidly due to waning public acceptance, increased litigation against school boards and educators regarding its use, and legislative bans. However, this decline appears to have slowed. In recent years, lawmakers were unsuccessful in passing federal legislation that would ban corporal punishment in all U.S. public and private schools (i.e., H.R. 2268 in 2015, H.R. 160 in 2017, H.R. 727 in 2019). None of these resolutions succeeded in becoming a law, and corporal punishment remains legal in private schools in all but two states (Bitensky, 2008; Gershaff & Font, 2016), and remains legal in both public and private schools in 19 states (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019). However, some strides in schools have been made. For example, recent legislation includes Mississippi's passing of a bill prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in public schools to discipline a student with a disability (i.e., those with an IEP or a 504 plan; Mississippi H. B. 1182). Additionally, in recent years many school districts in states that allow corporal punishment have developed school policies that prohibit the use of corporal punishment in their local schools (e.g., in the last district to allow corporal punishment in North Carolina the school board unanimously voted to end the practice; Michaels, 2018).

DELETERIOUS IMPACT AND INEFFECTIVENESS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Corporal punishment is a technique that could lead to physical injury (Sege & Siegel, 2018), and can cause serious emotional harm (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Sege & Siegel, 2018). Further, there is no clear evidence that corporal punishment will: (a) lead to better classroom management in the short term (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016) or long term (Regev et al., 2012); (b) enhance moral character development in children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016); or (c) increase students' respect for teachers or other authority figures (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Corporal punishment does not instruct a child in correct behavior (Gershoff & Font, 2016). Moreover, the use of corporal punishment in schools communicates that hitting is an appropriate way to solve problems and violence is acceptable in our society.

In addition to research that demonstrates that corporal punishment is not effective in promoting improved compliance, corporal punishment negatively affects the social, psychological, and educational development of students; contributes to the cycle of child abuse; and promotes proviolence attitudes of youth (Gershoff, 2010; Owen, 2005; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). A meta-analysis of published research on corporal punishment involving over 47,000 individuals found negative behavioral and emotional effects on children (Paolucci & Violato, 2004). A separate meta-analysis of longitudinal studies found that the practice was positively correlated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children (Ferguson, 2013). In addition to negative social and emotional outcomes for children, in its 2018 policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics cited a negative impact on cognitive development and increased cortisol levels leading to changes in brain structure (Sege & Siegel, 2018). Despite the lack of empirical support for corporal punishment as an effective classroom management tool and the documented negative developmental, physical, and emotional outcomes, it is still used in some schools (Ibáñez, 2021; Little & Akin-Little, 2008).

In the context of correcting student behavior, corporal punishment has been repeatedly found to be no more effective than nonviolent forms of discipline (Gershoff, 2010). Little and Akin-Little (2008) found that teachers rated corporal punishment as the least effective of eight considered methods of discipline. Justification for the use of corporal punishment is nonexistent. The administration of corporal

punishment can undermine the positive, affirming relationships between students and educators, which are associated with positive learning outcomes. Other negative side effects of corporal punishment include running away; being truant; fearing teachers or school; feeling high levels of anxiety, helplessness, and humiliation; being aggressive or destructive at home and school (Griffin, Robinson & Carpenter, 2000); and being at increased risk for physical abuse (Gershoff, 2010; Sege & Siegel, 2018). Additionally, corporal punishment does not provide instruction to a child in alternative appropriate behaviors (Gershoff & Font, 2016).

ALTERNATIVES TO CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Alternatively, the use of positive support systems in the schools (e.g., reinforcement and rewards provided for the display of acceptable behavior; Sugai & Horner, 2006) and other healthy forms of discipline (e.g., limit setting, redirecting, and setting future expectations; Sege & Siegel, 2018) have been shown to be effective in addressing problematic behaviors and promoting desirable behaviors in student. Effective school discipline includes prevention and intervention programs, proactive strategies to shape student behavior, changing school or classroom environments, and initiatives focused on the training and support provided to teachers and parents (Sugai & Horner, 2010). Effective school discipline relies on sound empirical evidence rather than the perpetuation of custom or habit. Positive and proactive forms of discipline and behavior correction teach children to recognize and adopt adaptive and socially acceptable behaviors in school. Over time, students learn which behaviors are reinforced and which are better to extinguish. When students are explicitly taught effective alternative behaviors and the reasons why these behaviors are more desirable and more effective than others in the context of school, they are more likely to understand a situation, make more adaptive decisions about their behavior, and continue to behave appropriately in future situations. Effective discipline is primarily a matter of modeling, instruction, and vicarious learning that leads to the internalization of adaptive prosocial behaviors. Notably, the administration of nonviolent consequences that are functionally related to a behavior that require corrections, should be used sparingly as a supplement to positive discipline practices to establish and maintain positive relationships within the school, and in alignment with multitiered systems of support (NASP, 2016). The following nonviolent alternatives can be implemented by school psychologists and other educators to promote students' development of behavioral self-management.

NONVIOLENT ALTERNATIVES FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS AND SUPPORTING THEIR BEHAVIOR

- Establish and teach clear behavioral expectations and guidelines for engaging in positive behaviors that are conducive to learning.
- Participate in the adoption and implementation of a multitiered system of supports to address social, emotional, and behavioral facets of learning and development.
- Encourage and support programs that emphasize early identification and intervention for school problems at the administrative, staff, and student levels such that teachers understand the function of students' misbehavior and sources of academic and behavioral difficulties.
- Encourage and support programs that emphasize prosocial community values, school pride, personal responsibility, and that support the mental health needs of children.
- Participate in the development of fair, reasonable, and consistent rules and appropriate consequences for violations with input from students, parents, school personnel, and community members.

- Help students achieve academic success by identifying students' academic and behavioral strengths and areas of support aligned with effective instructional interventions and supports and with MTSS.
- Promote strong family–school collaboration and parent support.
- Provide social skills, conflict resolution, anger management, antibullying, and problem-solving training.
- Provide individual, family, and group counseling when deemed necessary.

NONVIOLENT ALTERNATIVES FOR BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

- Encourage a whole-school systems approach for prevention and intervention that includes structured support for teaching and reinforcing acceptable behaviors, which may be supplemented with rational and humane consequences for rule violation.
- Encourage disciplinary practices that are meaningful to students, have both instructional and reflective components, and are consistent with a school's mission to educate.
- Encourage consistent, fair, and calm enforcement of rules at the individual, class, and school levels.
- Monitor the administration of discipline practices to ensure that the use of these practices is not due to bias, discrimination, and oppression, which disproportionately impact racial/ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, and persons with additional intersected minoritized identities, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, religion, and socioeconomic status.
- Participate in the development of discipline practices that are restorative in nature and prevent, address, and repair any harm done to others, which can help to create a sense of fairness and provide remedies to victims and communities after a rule violation occurs.
- Monitor school and classroom environments continuously to facilitate early detection and proactive problem solving to address behavior difficulties.
- Consult with and support teachers as they implement effective classroom management practices.

NONVIOLENT ALTERNATIVES THAT SUPPORT TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Provide inservice programs on communication, classroom management, understanding of behavior and individual differences, implicit and other forms of bias, and alternative ways for dealing with disruptive behaviors.
- Provide information on effective discipline programs and resources to parents, community members, school board members, school administrators, teachers, related school personnel, and other mental health professionals.
- Assist with the development and monitoring of school, classroom, and individual-level behavioral intervention programs.
- Promote National Child Abuse Prevention Month, SpankOut Day, and other organized activities to increase awareness of children's social issues, and post listings of and materials from national organizations that favor the abolition of corporal punishment.
- Network with community groups and mental health agencies, and medical and behavioral health professionals to provide programs and support for school staff.

NONVIOLENT ALTERNATIVES THAT PROVIDE TRAINING AND SUPPORT TO PARENTS

- Provide school-based consultation to parents on effectively managing child behavior.
- Inform parents about the effectiveness of positive reinforcement for behavioral change.
- Provide parenting classes on effective discipline, particularly as it relates to such issues as homework, school grades, peers, learning programs, developmental expectations, and undesirable behavior.
- Encourage home visitation programs for parents of babies and toddlers—programs that focus on developmental expectations, resources, and discipline.
- In schools where corporal punishment is still allowed, inform parents about exemptions to corporal punishment that may exist, such as written notification or amending the Individualized Education Program as well as what actions parents should take if a child is injured in situations of corporal punishment (seeing a physician, contacting child protection authorities and the police, taking color photos of the injury, and contacting advocacy organizations).

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are well-prepared to engage in efforts to minimize the exposure and effects of corporal punishment in schools. School psychologists can lead advocacy efforts in school districts to ban corporal punishment. By correcting misperceptions used to support the use of corporal punishment in schools, and by emphasizing the use of more effective, nonviolent disciplinary practices that are consistent with the mission of schools to teach and care for children, school psychologists can leverage their professional expertise to foster a more humane and caring school environment that is optimal for learning. School psychologists can support a shared understanding of behavioral expectations, suitable consequences, and fairhanded caring among students, families, and school personnel in many ways. This can be done by:

- supporting clear and explicit statements of care for students;
- developing professional sensitivity to varied cultural beliefs about fair and effective student discipline;
- collaborating with allied healthcare and social service professionals on initiatives related to student discipline;
- educating state level decision-makers about the overall ineffective and harmful use of corporal punishment and its disparate and inequitable use with minoritized students, particularly Black students and those with disabilities;
- modeling and teaching behaviors that contribute to an effective learning environment;
- adopting effective and equitable discipline practices, policies, and programs as alternatives to corporal punishment in the school environment;
- matching students with the appropriate level of academic challenge;
- advocating for the provision of a full complement of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports to students;
- gathering and synthesizing data that can be used to match students, families, and school personnel with the appropriate supports; and
- gathering and synthesizing data that can be used to monitor the fair and effective use of school programs and discipline practices.

School psychologists are well-prepared to participate in the identification of learning, social, emotional, and behavior problems that may lead to potential school discipline problems if not identified or addressed in time. Also, school psychologists can lead schools in applying a problem-solving approach to develop appropriate programs and interventions for children with a broad range of learning and behavior challenges. They can connect parents and teachers with resources in the school and community that focus on appropriate behavioral interventions for developing youth. School psychologists can disseminate and translate research about the development and evaluation of social skills training, disciplinary codes, and the effectiveness of nonviolent disciplinary methods. They can raise awareness among fellow educators, members of the community, and policy makers about the negative effects of corporal punishment and advocate for its abolition.

SUMMARY

NASP is strongly opposed to the use of corporal punishment in schools. Discipline is important, and effective alternatives are available to promote behavioral self-management. In comparison to nonviolent alternative methods of behavior management, corporal punishment is not effective in managing classroom behavior or in encouraging appropriate behavior in schools. Minoritized students, particularly Black students and those with disabilities, are disproportionately subjected to corporal punishment in schools. Because of its harmful effects on the physical, educational, psychological, and social–emotional development of students, corporal punishment bears no advantages to other forms of discipline that are more consistent with the educational mission of schools. The use of corporal punishment perpetuates the proviolence attitudes of youth, and teaches children that violence is an acceptable way of controlling the behavior of others. School psychologists can assist schools in addressing these issues in the following ways: (a) school psychologists can provide many direct and indirect services to improve the discipline of individual children; (b) school psychologists can provide services that improve classroom and school-wide discipline policies and procedures; (c) school psychologists can provide training to teachers and parents to understand the function of misbehavior and improve the use of nonviolent strategies to promote appropriate behavior of students; and (d) school psychologists can advocate for policy changes to disciplinary practices within the school and in their respective states. NASP will continue to work actively with other organizations to educate the public and policy makers about the negative effects of corporal punishment and empirically valid alternatives to its use and will seek the prohibition of corporal punishment in all schools.

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