

Corporal Punishment

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) opposes the use of corporal punishment in schools and supports ending its use in all schools. Further, NASP resolves to educate the public about the effects of corporal punishment, to provide alternatives to its use, and to encourage research and the dissemination of information about corporal punishment's effects and alternatives.

Corporal punishment of students is the intentional infliction of pain or discomfort and/or the use of physical force upon a student with the intention of causing the student to experience bodily pain so as to correct or punish the student's behavior (Bitensky, 2006). In the United States, the most typical form of school corporal punishment is striking a student's buttocks with a wooden paddle by a school authority because it is believed that the student has disobeyed a rule. Worldwide there are an increasing number of countries that have banned corporal punishment in schools (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010); however, the United States does not have any national policy concerning it (Robinson, Funk, Beth, & Bush, 2005). Within the United States, corporal punishment was first banned in the state of New Jersey in 1867. It is still currently allowed in schools across 19 states (Rollins, 2012); it has been banned in prisons and mental health institutions (Andero & Stewart, 2002). In 2011, a bill calling for an end to corporal punishment in all states (H.R.3027.IH – Ending Corporal Punishment in Schools Act of 2012) was proposed with 12 cosponsors in the House, but it did not make it out of the Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education subcommittee (Library of Congress, 2013).

Between the 1980s and the mid-1990s, the use of corporal punishment in schools declined rapidly due to waning public acceptance, increased litigation against school boards and educators regarding its use, and legislative bans. However, the decline appears to have slowed. In recent years the number of cases of physical punishment in schools is reported to be approximately 223,000 each year (Wasserman, 2011). Furthermore, students are more likely to experience corporal punishment if they are poor, male, of ethnic minority status, live within specific regions (Arcus, 2002; Owen, 2005; Robinson et al., 2005; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003) or have an existing disability (Rollins, 2012). The slow decline in the abolition of corporal punishment is likely to continue because, in those states that permit its use, more than half of citizens report that it is acceptable for a teacher to strike a student (Center for Effective Discipline, 2005).

Corporal punishment is a technique that is easily abused, leads to physical injuries, and can cause serious emotional harm (Hyman & Perone, 1998). Further, there is no clear evidence that corporal punishment will (a) lead to better control in the classroom, (b) enhance moral character development in children, or (c) increase the students' respect for teachers or other authority figures (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Corporal punishment does not instruct a child in correct behavior. Teaching an appropriate replacement behavior provides students with a positive alternative to inappropriate behavior. Moreover, the use of corporal punishment in schools communicates that hitting is the correct way to solve problems and violence is acceptable in our society. Corporal

punishment does not produce long-lasting improvements in behavior; it negatively affects the social, psychological, and educational development of students; it contributes to the cycle of child abuse; and promotes proviolence attitudes of youth (Andero & Stewart, 2002; 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 on corporal punishment found that the practice was positively correlated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children (Ferguson, 2013). It is alarming that, despite the lack of empirical support for corporal punishment as an effective classroom management technique, it is still used in some schools (Little & Akin-Little, 2008).

Whereas the intent of school corporal punishment may be to correct student behavior, corporal punishment has been repeatedly found to be no more effective than nonviolent forms of discipline (Gershoff, 2010). Thus, the use of corporal punishment cannot be justified, given the costs and negative consequences of the practice when other effective discipline techniques are available to schools. Alternatively, the use of positive support systems (e.g., reinforcement and rewards provided for the display of acceptable behavior) has been shown to be extremely effective in addressing problematic behaviors and promoting desirable behaviors in students (Sugai & Horner, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2014). Nonviolent forms of discipline are important and schools have a strong role in teaching children to be self-disciplined. When students are self-disciplined, they understand a situation, make proper decisions about their behavior, and behave appropriately when unsupervised by adults. Effective discipline is primarily a matter of instruction and the adoption of adaptive prosocial behaviors rather than a matter of punishment. The administration of corporal punishment may serve to 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 increased risk for physical abuse (Gershoff, 2010).

ALTERNATIVES TO CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Effective discipline includes prevention and intervention programs and strategies for changing student behavior, changing school or classroom environments, and educating and supporting teachers and parents (Sugai & Horner, 2011). It relies on sound empirical evidence rather than the perpetuation of custom or habit. The reader may also refer to NASP's Position Statement "Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students" for clarification on a systems approach to prevention and intervention. The following alternatives can be implemented by school psychologists and other educators to promote self-discipline.

ALTERNATIVES FOR EDUCATING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS

- Help students achieve academic success through identification of academic and behavioral issues or challenges and strengths leading to effective instructional interventions and supports.
- Encourage a whole-school systems approach for prevention and intervention that includes structured supports for teaching and reinforcing replacement behaviors and incremental consequences for rule violation and compliance to encourage student success and self-esteem.
- Establish and teach clear behavioral expectations and guidelines for engaging in positive behaviors conducive to learning.

- Encourage disciplinary practices that may be meaningful to students, have both an instructional and reflective component, 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.
- Provide individual, family, and group counseling when deemed necessary.
- Provide social skills conflict resolution, self-regulation and prosocial skills, and problem-solving training.

ALTERNATIVES FOR CHANGE IN THE SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

- Encourage and support programs that emphasize early diagnosis and intervention for school problems at the administrative, staff, and student levels.
- Encourage programs that emphasize values, school pride, and personal responsibility and that support the mental health needs of children.
- Monitor school and classroom environments continuously to facilitate early detection of difficulties and facilitate proactive problem solving to address behavior difficulties.
- Consult with and support teachers as they implement effective classroom management practices.
- Encourage development of fair, reasonable, and consistent rules and appropriate consequences for violations with input from students, parents, school personnel, and community members.
- Employ discipline practices, which can help to restore justice for victims and communities after a rule violation.
- Promote strong family–school collaboration and parent support.

ALTERNATIVES FOR EDUCATING AND SUPPORTING TEACHERS (AS PREVENTIVE MEASURES)

- 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 development and monitoring of school-level, classroom-level, and individual behavioral intervention programs.
- Provide inservice programs on communication, classroom management, understanding of behavior and individual differences, and alternative ways for dealing with misbehavior.
- Promote National Child Abuse Prevention Month, SpankOut Day, and other organized activities to increase awareness of children’s social issues, and post listings of national organizations that favor abolition of corporal punishment.
- Network with community groups and mental health agencies to provide programs and support for school staff.

ALTERNATIVES FOR EDUCATING AND SUPPORTING PARENTS

- 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.
- Provide school-based consultation to parents on effectively managing child behavior.

- Encourage home visitation programs for parents of babies and toddlers—programs that focus on developmental expectations, resources, and discipline.
- If corporal punishment is 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 (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 can take leadership roles to encourage school districts to ban corporal punishment, develop effective discipline programs as alternatives, and correct misperceptions used to support the use of corporal punishment. Their training leaves them well-prepared to identify learning, social, emotional, and behavior problems that lead to school discipline problems if undiagnosed and untreated. In addition, their training in problem-solving procedures allows them to develop appropriate programs and interventions for children with a broad range of learning and behavior problems. They can provide education programs for parents and teachers that focus on appropriate ways to deal with misbehavior and foster self-discipline. School psychologists can disseminate research about the development and evaluation of disciplinary codes, social skills training, and the effectiveness of alternative discipline methods. They can adopt a consultative role and educate educators, the community, and policy makers about the effects of corporal punishment and advocate for its abolition. School psychologists are positioned, through their training, to promote the use of positive behavior supports, which explicitly teach students how to behave appropriately in school and reinforce these desirable behaviors before disciplinary practices are required. School psychologists can also advocate for changes in public policy to further disallow corporal punishment in schools.

SUMMARY

NASP is opposed to the use of corporal punishment in schools because of its harmful physical, educational, psychological, and social effects on students. Corporal punishment contributes to the cycle of child abuse and proviolence attitudes of youth in that children learn that violence is an acceptable way of controlling the behavior of others. Discipline is important, and effective alternatives are available to help students develop self-discipline. These alternative strategies are preventive and instructional rather than punitive. School psychologists provide many direct services to improve discipline of individual children as well as services that improve classroom and school-wide discipline. NASP will continue to work actively with other organizations to educate the public and policy makers about the 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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