

Spanking Isn't The Answer

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

To spank or not to spank? Dustin's parents find themselves divided over the answer. For Dustin's father, a good whack on his bottom when he was a child kept him in line. And he turned out just fine. Dustin's mother believes children should be loved, not hit. She was never spanked and she also turned out okay.

There are several reasons not to punish by spanking.

Studies suggest spanking is not as effective as many parents believe at teaching appropriate behavior or stopping misbehavior. Suppose Dustin, who is six years old, beats up on his younger brother Chuckie, when Chuckie knocks down Dustin's toy fort. Dad spanks Dustin.

What does Dustin learn? He does not learn how to deal with Chuckie when he breaks his fort. He may learn not to hit Chuckie, or he may learn simply not to do it when Dad is around. Dad is sending a confusing message: Dad hit Dustin for hitting Chuckie. Apparently, it's OK to hit someone who does something you don't like – Dad did it – just don't do it when Dad is around.

Spanking is often considered an abuse of power. Most parents won't tolerate a neighbor spanking their child, and most preschools and day care centers won't allow staff to spank. Not many parents spank teenage sons big enough to swing back.

Sometimes spanking can get dangerous. Some parents, maybe most parents, get angry on occasion, really furious. When spanking is routine, it is easier for a parent to lose control in such cases, go too far, and cause serious physical or psychological damage.

Relationships can also suffer. Who likes someone who hits them?

But many parents, some cultural groups, and a few child professionals believe that spanking certainly gets children's attention, shows them you care and are in charge, and stops the child's misbehavior at once. Used sparingly and not aggressively, they maintain, it works and does not harm children. The debate will go on.

Let's be clear, inappropriate behavior should not be tolerated. Children need limits, rules, and consequences for violations. Limits and rules are better enforced through the use of time-outs, withholding opportunities and privileges, and other nonphysical means.

Parents need to guide, teach, and correct their children's behavior. They also need to show them understanding, love, and respect. There are methods of teaching and discipline that probably do these things better than spanking.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.