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*Corporal Punishment of  
Children in Theoretical  
Perspective*

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*Theoretical Approaches to Corporal Punishment*

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Corporal punishment, as we use the term in this book, is:

the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behavior.

The phrase "pain, but not injury" helps to distinguish corporal punishment from physical abuse: our subject is socially acceptable and legal corporal punishment. The phrase "with the intention of causing a child to experience pain" distinguishes corporal punishment from acts that have other purposes but may also cause pain, such as putting an antiseptic on a cut. It also makes explicit the fact that causing pain is intentional, not incidental. This point may seem obvious, but it is salutary to emphasize, since our culture leads people to focus on why the child was hit, rather than on the fact that hitting hurts.

When one applies this definition to specific acts in order to identify corporal punishment, many questions arise. The most frequent forms of corporal punishment are spanking, slapping, grabbing, or shoving a child "roughly" (with more force than is needed to move the child). But should hitting a child with an object such as a hairbrush, belt, or paddle be included? Traditional cultural norms permit that. Such norms were upheld as recently as a 1992 decision of the New Hampshire Supreme Court. On the other hand, hitting with an object

poses a significant risk of causing an injury which may require medical treatment and from that point of view might be considered physical abuse rather than corporal punishment. In fact, public opinion seems to be moving in that direction. A 1978 survey in Texas, for instance, found that only a third of the adult population regarded hitting a child with a belt or wooden paddle as "physical abuse." When the study was repeated in 1991, however, almost half regarded these acts as physical abuse (Teske and Thurman 1992: table 12); close to a majority now regard hitting with an object as abuse rather than corporal punishment.

Ordinary language is also ambiguous. In many poor and minority communities "beating" is a generic term for any corporal punishment. To some, "spanking" means slapping a child on the buttocks (traditionally, the bare buttocks). For middle-class Americans, it tends to be a generic term for slapping or hitting any part of the child. Probably the most frequent form of corporal punishment is slapping a child's hand for touching something.

Whatever the ambiguities in how we think and talk about corporal punishment, the overwhelming majority of adult Americans approve of it. Many regard corporal punishment positively as a customary and necessary technique of child rearing, and almost everyone believes that it may be necessary at least as a punishment of last resort. Close to 100 percent of parents use corporal punishment on toddlers. Just over half of all American children are still being hit by their parents in adolescence, and for about a quarter hitting continues until they physically leave the family home (Straus 1991, 1994).

The legitimacy of corporal punishment, moreover, is firmly reflected in and backed by law. The state laws of Texas and New Hampshire, to cite two examples, provide clear illustration of the legal status of corporal punishment. In the Texas Penal Code the section entitled "General Justification" of violence declares: "The use of force, but not deadly force, against a child younger than 18 years is justified: 1. if the actor is the child's parent or step-parent or is acting in loco parentis to the child; and 2. when and to the degree the actor reasonably believes that force is necessary to discipline the child or to safeguard or promote welfare" (9.61, West Publishing, 1983). The New Hampshire Criminal Code similarly declares: "A parent, guardian or other person responsible for the general care and welfare of a minor is justified in using force against such a minor when and to the extent that he reasonably believes it necessary to prevent or punish such a minor's misconduct" (627.6:1, Equity Publishing, 1985). The New Hampshire statute places no explicit limits on the degree of force, and the Texas statute stipulates only that it cannot be "deadly."

In both states the statutes also apply to teachers. However, in New Hampshire the state education department has issued regulations ending corporal

punishment in all state-funded schools. The New Hampshire legislature did not object to these regulations, but it rejected bills (in 1988 and again in 1990) to ban corporal punishment in all schools, not just state-funded schools. The Texas legislature defeated a bill in 1992 to forbid corporal punishment by teachers.

To this day, the federal government's National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect seems to give tacit approval to corporal punishment. A 1992 publication, for example, states: "The injury [from physical abuse] may have resulted from over-discipline or physical punishment that is inappropriate to the child's age" (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect 1992: 2), implying that discipline which is not "over-discipline," and physical punishment appropriate to a child's age, would be legitimate.

Parents can of course be charged with physical abuse if the hitting exceeds the frequency and severity of violence allowed by cultural norms for disciplining children. But in fact, parents are rarely held accountable by the courts for "excessive" corporal punishment. The reason is that child protective services rarely have the resources to attend to such cases, and moreover the norms are not clear.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the general acceptance and widespread use of corporal punishment, there are nonetheless signs that American society may have reached a turning point concerning cultural norms on corporal punishment and the actual use of corporal punishment. There are a number of indications of such a change under way. A decade ago, we would have estimated that it would be at least two generations before the United States arrived at the point that led Sweden in 1979 to make any corporal punishment of children by parents illegal. Now we think that it could occur within the next ten to twenty years because the pace of change is accelerating. Here are some of the small, but cumulatively important, indicators of that impending change:

1. National surveys of children in 1975 and 1985 show that although the overall one-year prevalence rates of corporal punishment did not change (the same percentage of parents spanked in 1985 as in 1975), there were statistically significant decreases in three aspects of corporal punishment: chronicity, severity, and the number of years parents continued hitting.
2. The number of states that prohibit use of corporal punishment by teachers has been growing exponentially.
3. In 1992, the Task Force on Corporal Punishment was established by the American Psychological Association, Division of Children and Youth Services; a similar task force was established a year earlier by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

4. A national advocacy organization devoted solely to eliminating corporal punishment—EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children) was established, also in 1992. Actually, it is EPOCH-USA, because it is an affiliate of a new international advocacy organization with affiliates in many countries, including the United Kingdom (long a bastion of corporal punishment).

However these developments play out over time, they are likely to stimulate research in the meanwhile on corporal punishment—much as growing disquiet over the discovery of child abuse in the late 1960s spurred a flurry of research on battered and abused children. Given the near universality of corporal punishment in the socialization experience of children, one might think that it would be a familiar and well-researched topic in the literature. Ironically, however, relative to its importance, corporal punishment has been broadly neglected. It likewise receives scant attention in textbooks and books of advice to parents. Straus (1994), for example, examined ten of the leading child-development textbooks and found they devoted an average of only half a page to corporal punishment.

The most important reason for such neglect, we believe, is an unrecognized “selective inattention” to corporal punishment. Deeply embedded cultural norms have led almost the entire population, including most social scientists, to believe that corporal punishment is “sometimes necessary” for the welfare of the child (Straus 1991, 1994).

The aim of this book is to focus concerted attention, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, on corporal punishment, and thus to help fill a significant lacuna in the research literature. The lack of adequate theoretical grounding for research has undoubtedly hampered study of corporal punishment. A theory-based approach to corporal punishment is needed because it is likely to stimulate more creative and fundamental research than the ad hoc approach that now prevails. Theoretically grounded research is also needed because it provides meaningful ways of organizing and interpreting research findings. Probably the main exception to the theoretical vacuum is social-learning theory (Bandura 1973), which suggests broadly that children learn behaviors through trial-and-error conditioning and also through vicarious learning, observing the behavior of others and the positive or negative consequences it brings. Valuable as the social learning approach has been, it is not sufficient to cope with the phenomenon of corporal punishment. It deals with only limited aspects of what leads parents to hit their children and with only limited aspects of the consequences for children of being hit by their parents. To complement social-learning theory it is important also to examine corporal punishment by parents through the lenses of a number of other theories, such as attribu-

tion theory, exchange theory, social-stress theory, family-systems theory, and social-control theory. Hence our aim in this book to assemble and juxtapose a wide array of theoretical perspectives on corporal punishment.

We solicited contributions from leading scholars in a number of disciplines and theoretical traditions and asked each to apply a given theory to the task of explaining the causes and consequences of corporal punishment by parents. In each chapter, our contributors define corporal punishment from the perspective of a particular theory, identify those aspects of corporal punishment that the theory is most adequate to explain, and relate the theory at hand to other theories. Many of the chapters also review empirical research on corporal punishment informed by the given theories, explore methodological issues, and suggest avenues for further research.

We hope that this book will stimulate further research by psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists concerned with child development and parent behavior. Given the recent and growing concern with corporal punishment, we believe that the book appears at an opportune moment, when it might be the catalyst for more systematic and coherent research.

### *Note*

1. However, the law does not give specific guidelines, and, as a result, there is tremendous ambiguity concerning the line between physical punishment and physical abuse. See Gelles and Straus (1979) and Straus (1990a) for a discussion of the concept of abuse.