

To Spank Or Not To Spank *by Archibald D. Hart, Ph.D.*

In this day when the risk of being accused of child abuse is high, is there any question more vexing to parents than that of whether or not to spank a child? Most experts now believe that physical discipline is a throwback to an uncivilized age. Spanking is outdated, they say, an inferior and unnecessary form of punishment.

But is a “spanking”, when administered reasonably and as a last resort, always bad? Is there no redeeming aspect to the biblical mandate: “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him”? (Proverbs 13:14 – NIV). Are there not at least some circumstances that justify a physical consequence to some bad behavior?

Why is spanking considered to be bad?

One of the reasons why any physical discipline is viewed negatively is that it is seldom done reasonably and properly. Invariably it teaches a child that hitting someone is acceptable. I don’t doubt that this is a form of aggression that can lead to child abuse when a parent’s anger is out of control.

Most parents who resort to spanking, do so because they have lost control over their anger, and when that happens the punishment becomes abusive – and always destructive to the parent/child relationship. Even Christian parents, believing that they are following the biblical mandate to “not spare the rod” have been known to go too far and abuse a child. There have even been cases where such parents, believing that they are doing what God intends have punished a child to the point of maiming or even killing the boy or girl – hardly a witness to our faith!

I am sure that most parents reading this are not in this category. They only want what is best for their child. So, to clarify this issue, let me put the question this way: does the potential for abuse mean that any form of spanking, carried out reasonably and without anger, is an unacceptable way to raise children today? I don’t think so.

How common is spanking?

When you look at the research, pediatricians and child psychologists can be divided over this issue. One recent survey showed that 80% of parents admitted that they had spanked a child – but only 10% felt it was a good method of discipline. Seventy percent regretted their actions and wished they knew better methods. Does a reasonable, minor spanking that does not harm a child constitute abuse?

I don’t believe so. Black’s Law dictionary defines child abuse as, “An intentional or neglectful physical or emotional injury imposed on a child, including sexual molestation” – clearly minor spanking does not qualify. Does a spanking that bruises or causes a child to be harmed constitute abuse? Yes it does. And here is the rub: How can an angry parent know what constitutes a reasonable punishment? You can’t take a spanking back, nor can you undo the emotional harm that occurs when a child experiences an unjust physical punishment.

However, let me also say that a parent withholding love as punishment can be just as abusive as one who beats a child. I have had many of my patients say to me that they wished they had been spanked as a child. The prolonged cold rejection of an indifferent parent had done far more harm to them!

Balancing your discipline

So, how can we achieve balance here? Here are some suggestions:

1. First, let me make my position very clear here. The Proverbs 13:14 statement is NOT a mandate to only use a physical form of punishment. We always only read the first part and not the whole verse. It is a mandate to discipline a child, and there are **many** ways a parent can do this biblically besides reaching for the nearest belt or stick and dragging your child to the woodshed. It is the parent who never disciplines ‘that hates his or her child’.
2. No matter what discipline you use, at all costs avoid doing it in anger. Wait until you have calmed down. If necessary, tell your child that you will wait, and then address the discipline issue when your anger had passed – it will be more effective. Angry parents who impulsively lash out and then rationalize their behavior on the grounds that they are “doing it biblically”, will have a lot to answer for!
3. Reserve a spank (which I prefer over ‘spanking’) for severe misbehaviors, especially those that involve the child being a danger to him/herself or others. Throwing sand in another child’s eyes, in pay or when angry, or running into a busy street when told not to, may warrant a physically painful, though not damaging spank. The consequences of such behavior more than justify this response.
4. Work at developing a better general system of discipline that applies definite consequences for unacceptable behaviors. These consequences should ALWAYS be spelled out ahead (e.g. ‘timeout’) and should be applied consistently. **It is inconsistency of discipline that undermines it.** Whenever you say, “The next time you do...., I will....”, mean it! Then do it! You will be quite surprised how easy discipline then becomes. If you want more help here see my book “Stress and your Child” Word Books).

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