



## **Congressional Briefing on Corporal Punishment**

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### ***Why We Need to Stop Using Corporal Punishment on our Children***

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Exactly one week ago, a terrible story appeared in newspapers around the country. An 8-yr-old boy from Alabama was charged with murder. He had beaten a 17-month-old female toddler named Kelci Lewis to death. The boy was left alone in charge of other young children. He was trying to get the toddler to stop crying. I have no doubt the boy was merely copying what he had experienced---adults beating children when they “misbehave.” He hit her repeatedly in an effort to get her to change her behavior. Children learn what they live.

This past June in Minnesota the same tragedy occurred---except the male charged with fatally beating a 2-year-old to death was 17 years old. Fortunately, child fatalities following a disciplinary incident are rare. Yet stories of corporal punishment run amok are not. All too often, efforts to “discipline” get out of hand and can turn violent. Last fall, football star Adrian Peterson used a tree switch to discipline his 4-yr-old son in the same aggressive way he was disciplined as a child in East Texas. How many of you recall the video a few years back that went viral? It was a Texas judge (William Adams) using a belt to savagely beat his teenage daughter for disobeying him.

### **The Problem of Corporal Punishment**

I am a psychologist who has spent more than 30 years studying childrearing and discipline. Although these stories are painful to hear, none of them is surprising to me. And these kinds of incidents, when corporal punishment is used in the name of discipline and justified as “reasonable punishment,” occur in too many families and all too frequently.

With the widespread practice of CP, you might expect the scientific research to find it is effective and has positive results. In fact, the opposite is true. The research is clear, consistent, and negative. The science shows CP is an ineffective discipline technique. Spanking simply does not work---other than getting instant compliance from a child. It does not teach children how to behave in the long-term, nor does it increase overall compliance.

In fact, corporal punishment does exactly the opposite of what it’s intended to do. It teaches children to use hitting as a response to conflict. No wonder children who are hit resort to hitting when in conflict with peers. No wonder youth who are hit turn to hitting girlfriends or boyfriends when under stress. No wonder adults who were hit batter their partners, spouses, or children.

The science is clear. Hundreds of scientific studies have shown the use of CP is linked to child behavioral problems. More than 20 serious childhood and adult problems have been linked to use of corporal punishment, including behavioral, emotional, mental health, cognitive, and even physical health problems.

Here's a brief sampling. Child aggression is the most common result of parental corporal punishment, but the problems go well beyond that. Children who are spanked and slapped are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and grow up to have mental health problems. The use of corporal punishment is also related to delayed cognitive development and poor school achievement. Corporal punishment does not promote positive family communication or relationships; it does the opposite. It leaves children angry, sad, and scared of their parents. Children who are hit feel humiliated and powerless. Because of the strong negative emotional reactions to being hit, children often do not learn the message parents were attempting to communicate.

The most serious problem is that disciplinary incidents sometime escalate into child abuse incidents as I illustrated at the beginning of my comments. Child abuse is at least three times more common in families that rely on corporal punishment. A majority of physical abuse incidents begin as discipline that spin out of control. One study found that 80% of physical abuse cases began as disciplinary incidents. If we want to reduce child physical abuse, we need to get parents to stop hitting their children.

Every reputable, evidence-based parent education or intervention program teaches parents not to hit their children. Every single one. So why don't we take a stand against something that is so clearly harmful to the health of our children and families?

### **The Need to Change Our Practices**

Some people get very upset at the idea of giving up their "right to spank" their children. Indeed it is a hot button issue. Yet all mothers and fathers share some common goals. All parents want to guide their children to develop into happy, well adjusted, and productive adults. And what do children want? Children want parents to love and respect them----and not hurt them. Using brute force--in essence bullying a child--is obviously not the way to show children love, respect, and teach them positive values. Corporal punishment is at odds with both parents' and children's goals.

For all these reasons, I am working to changing how we as a nation discipline our children. I am a founding board member and current President of the U.S. Alliance to End the Hitting of Children, a national 501(c)3 organization committed to ending corporal punishment of all children—both in the schools and homes.

The Alliance recognizes there is a great need to educate Americans about the serious and ongoing problem of corporal punishment. We want to teach and empower parents to adopt better, more effective childrearing methods.

A research-based approach to discipline called "positive discipline" has evolved over the past few decades, such as the "Positive Discipline in Everyday Parenting" program. This approach fully embraces parents' need to effectively discipline children without resorting to ineffective and harmful practices such as corporal punishment. Instead, parents are taught such things as how to reward desired behavior in children, how to modify their expectations of compliance to be more in

line with a child's brain development, and how to provide firm boundaries without resorting to hitting. There are many positive discipline alternatives to spanking or slapping which promote cooperative relationships between parents and children.

Let us remember that corporal punishment of children is not simply a private family matter. It is a matter that infringes on basic human rights for all people of all ages. America was once a world leader in human rights. However, we have steadfastly failed to recognize children's right not to be hit. We are falling increasingly behind other countries that have recognized this basic human right to safety and protection. The United States is the only country that has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We lag far behind 127 countries that have legislatively banned corporal punishment in schools.

We also lag behind 47 countries that have banned all corporal punishment of children. Just last week, Ireland joined 46 other countries to end corporal punishment and stop allowing the term "reasonable discipline," a phrase that comes from British common law, to be used to justify hitting children.

It is the duty of our government to protect all human rights---including those of children. The science, many professional organizations (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics & American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry), and informed citizens are all in accord that we, as a nation, need to stop hitting our children.

Although some people may recoil at the idea of telling parents they cannot spank their children, many of those same people would also have bristled at regulations to wear seat belts in automobiles or policies to limit exposure to second-hand smoke. Indeed, many of these same people would not hesitate to press charges if they were assaulted by an adult in the way many children are hit by their parents or school administrators.

### **Conclusion**

Corporal punishment is a major public health problem that has gone unrecognized for too long. We need to educate and support mothers and fathers to effectively rear the next generation. After all, for most of us, this is the most important activity we will do in our lifetime. There is no single action we can take in this country that would help children and parents more than to end all use of corporal punishment.

It will take much effort to change our discipline culture. But if we save one child from being humiliated, one child from developing mental health problems, one child--like Kelci Lewis--from being beat to death, then this effort will be worth it.