

A LINE ON LIFE

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Spare the Rod *

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Most of us can remember being spanked as young children. Since we turned out all right, spanking still seems to be an adequate method for disciplining our children. However, we should be aware that *severe* physical punishment or abuse is bad for children. Even so, little research has been done to compare the effect of spanking to other methods of discipline. The research that has been done suggests that – if children are punished by physical aggression – these children learn to control other children by physical means.

**If disciplined harshly,
children are likely to use similar methods
in dealing with their peers.**

Last year, a group of researchers at Vanderbilt University, headed by psychologist Zvi Strassberg, ran a study involving the families of 273 kindergarten children. The children were from several schools in Tennessee and Indiana, and their proportions by sex and race were representative of these areas.

In questionnaires and oral interviews, parents told how they had disciplined their children during the previous year. After gaining that information, the children were observed interacting with others on the playground. The trained observers did not know how the children had been disciplined. Those children who were spanked showed higher levels of physical aggression toward their peers. The highest levels of aggression were observed with children whose parents used more violent forms of punishment.

Strassberg and his associates analyzed the families in terms of socioeconomic status, one vs. two-parent families and other factors. In two-parent families, the aggressive discipline of one parent may be balanced by the discipline methods of the other. When both parents have hostile punishing methods, the child tends to be the most aggressive.

According to Strassberg's researchers, the actual **spanking** and the **anger** expressed seemed to be the most critical factors. The child's later aggression seems to be an imitation of parental anger.

Even if we want to stop or reduce spanking, most parents are at a loss to what to do in place of spanking. Here are some suggestions.

- **Distract rowdy children.** Children can be channeled into new activities to change their focus.

- **Ignore antics.** Often children misbehave to get attention. If this is true – as long as their actions do not endanger people or property – ignoring them will keep them from getting the attention they want. Gradually, the behavior will stop.
- **Use time-outs.** Isolate the child from the situation related to the bad behavior – and pleasurable activities. (To isolate children where they can engage in pleasurable activities keeps them from thinking about what they have done.) The time-out interrupts the bad actions and teaches responsibility. Along with time-outs, parents need to explain what was bad about the specific behavior. It is very important to praise good behaviors too. Time-outs can be done even with preschoolers, but they should be about a minute long for each year of the child's age.
- **Take care of your own needs.** Often harsh discipline is related to anger caused by the tremendous frustration felt by the parents. To reduce this anger, try to take a break from your children. Call a friend or take a walk.

If you still need more advice, there is a 24-hour-a-day source of information through the **Parents Anonymous Family Hotline** at **1-800-352-0528**.

* Adapted from "Spanking may foster aggression toward peers in young children" and "What else can you do beside spanking?" *The Menninger Letter*, March, 1995, pages 1-2.