Intergenerational Transmission

Sandra L. Bloom, M.D.

Childrearing Conditions and Practices

A child may not be subjected to physical punishment or other injurious or humiliating treatment.

Parenthood and Guardianship Code, Sweden, 1979

In 1979, Sweden became the first country to ban the spanking of children. Since then, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Austria have all joined Sweden in their efforts to stop the physical punishment of children. This move represents continuing progress in efforts to understand the needs of children, efforts that have been developing for generations. To understand the significance of this change, we must take a quick look at the history of childhood.

DeMause (1974) has chronicled the improvement in treatment of children from ancient times through modern societies. His theory of psychohistory proposes that each generation was able to improve treatment of their children over the treatment received from their parents with the benefit of hindsight. He divides the history of childhood into six stages, ranging from an Infanticidal Stage, roughly until 400 AD when killing unwanted children was acceptable practice, through an Abandonment Stage when it was no longer acceptable to kill children although it was acceptable to abandon them, to an Intrusive Mode, a Socialization Mode, and finally to the Helping Mode. This most recent child-rearing mode began after the Second World War and according to DeMause is the first time in history that the needs of the children are placed ahead of the child satisfying the needs of the parents [1]. The progress of history, according to these ideas, is the story of increasing involvement and attachment between parents and children and the continuing problems of history are related to continuing failures or deficits in this critical attachment. Psychological processes governing parents' ability to identify and empathize with children, and thereby to be sensitive to their needs, are thought to be central to the culture's overall conception of children's place in the society. The nature of childhood, including fundamental issues of life, death, work and nurturance, is determined by the ability of the caretaking generation to process its traumatic childhood experiences.

Child-rearing practices and attitudes, then, tell us something about the mental health and social well being of the adults in a particular culture. Just as the fabled mine canary in West Virginia coal mines told
miners when the air was unhealthy, the dependent status of children means they are subject to the circumstances of parents' lives, including their psychological status, and that cultural attitudes develop to rationalize and promote child-rearing practices consistent with these conditions.

From this perspective of culture and history we can consider the significance of the fact that there are currently no indications that American children can expect relief fromspanking and corporal punishment like that experienced in Scandinavian countries. In fact, the laws in each state at present give parents the right to hit a child with an object provided no serious injury results [2]. Ninety-nine percent of parents studied in Sears, Macoby, and Levin's 1957 landmark study, Patterns of Child Rearing, hit their children. Hitting children is one of the few child-rearing practices that most parents agree upon. One quarter of infants one to six months were spanked in a Los Angeles study, and by the second half of the first year, nearly half of the infants were being spanked. More than 90% of American parents use corporal punishment on toddlers and more than half continue this into the early teen years. According to a recent Gallup poll, nothing much has changed in the last fifty years. The percent of Americans who approve of spanking children, 65%, is down only slightly from the 74% who approved of spanking in 1946. This approval also appears to apply to actual practice: almost exactly the same number of today's adults, 81%, say that they were spanked as a child as was the case when Americans were asked the same question in 1947 (Gallup Organization, Inc., 1997). The corporal punishment of children has an established place in cultural history. The physical punishment of children is rooted in beliefs about the need to “break children’s wills” and a basic belief that self-will is evil and sinful. The corporal punishment of children has long cultural roots. Although “Spare the rod, spoil the child” is not actually in the Bible, the Old Testament certainly makes reference to this concept, according to Philip Greven in Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse. As he points out: “More than two thousand years of physical violence and painful assaults against the bodies and wills of children have been justified by these sayings and scattered through the Old Testament collection of sayings attributed to Solomon” [3]. But then, the Old Testament is noted for its vivid descriptions of violence and “righteous” warfare.

The New Testament is far less clear on the matter. In fact, Greven points out that “When a Christian parent tells a child who is about to be punished that ‘Jesus teaches that you must receive the rod’, he cannot justify this with any text from the Gospels. Jesus never advocated any such punishment. Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus approve of the infliction of pain upon children by the rod or by any other such implement, nor is he ever reported to have recommended any kind of physical discipline of children to any parent” (p.51). Despite this finding, Protestant fundamentalism is closely linked to favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment of children in the home and the school. According to a recent study, greater personal religiosity and adherence to a punitive image of God account for very little of the relationship. Instead, the emphasis on biblical literalness among fundamentalists appears to be a major source of their advocacy of corporal punishment [4].

In terms of deMause's evolutionary perspective, the supposed “socializing function” of corporal punishment continues to dominate much thinking about children and helps to rationalize the use of corporal punishment. A recent advocate of the physical punishment of children wrote, “If the punishment is of the right kind it not only takes effect physically, but through physical terror and pain, it
awakens and sharpens the consciousness that there is a moral power over us, a righteous judge and a law which cannot be broken” (p.71) [5].

A number of myths perpetuate corporal punishment in child-rearing practices in the U.S. As indicated by Strauss (1994), these are:

1. Spanking works better.
2. Spanking is needed as a last resort.
3. Spanking is harmless.
4. One or two times won’t cause any damage.
5. Parents can’t stop without training.
6. If you don’t spank, your children will be spoiled or run wild.
7. Parents spank rarely or only for serious problems.
8. By the time a child is a teenager, parents have stopped.
9. If parents don’t spank, they will verbally abuse their child.
10. It is unrealistic to expect parents never to spank.

One of the principles used to justify the use of corporal punishment is fear. “Fear acts as a catalyst for love. He who fears God most will love him best, If God, the perfect Father, so disciplines His children as to inspire fear, then we should follow the same pattern in dealing with our children” ( p.64) [3]. Through the study of trauma, we now know that fear does amazing things to a person, that fear increases our attachment, even to abusing objects, that it inhibits our ability to think clearly and thus makes us more blindly obedient, that it alters the way we remember and learn things, that it dramatically changes the way we relate to ourselves and other people. Fear does not inspire or serve as a catalyst for love. It does, however, provide the means of control, the method of manipulating others in service of the abuse of power. There is now an abundance of evidence linking corporal punishment, to social and psychological problems. Straus recently reviewed numerous studies conducted over the last fifty years showing the connection between the uses of physical punishment, depression and suicide. The finding was quite clear: the more corporal punishment, the greater the chances of being depressed as an adult and the more likely to have thoughts about killing oneself [2].

There are gender differences when it comes to punishment. In a recent study, boys received higher amounts of harsh discipline on all outcome measures. For boys, growing up in an impoverished home was predictive of the greater likelihood of receiving harsh punishment. And “strict” discipline even seems to effect intelligence measures. Using IQ at age 3 years as the outcome measure, girls were found to be vulnerable to persistent harsh discipline and lack of maternal warmth. Maternal harsh discipline in a context of low maternal warmth was associated with IQ scores for girls that are 12 points lower than the IQ scores of girls who received low punishment and high warmth (Smith and Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

In another study, researchers at the Family Research Lab wanted to test the hypothesis that when parents use corporal punishment to correct antisocial behavior in their children, that instead the punishment increases the same kind of behavior. They studied families for two years and found that parental physical punishment designed to stop antisocial behavior had the opposite effect (Straus,
Sugarman, and Giles-Sims, 1997). Results of an eighteen-year longitudinal study of the effects of physical punishment were recently release. The study drew three major conclusions: (1) those exposed to harsh or abusive treatment during childhood are an at-risk population for juvenile offending, substance abuse, and mental health problems; (2) much of this elevated risk arises from the social context within which harsh or abusive treatment occurs; (3) nonetheless, exposure to abuse appears to increase risks of involvement in violent behavior and alcohol abuse (Fergusson and Lynskey, 1997).

Violent adults were violent children and violent children learn about violence at home. Many studies have shown that physically and sexually abused children have high rates of violence and crime later in life (Eisenman, 1993; Laub and Lauritsen 1995; Sheridan, M.J. 1995; Straus 1994; Widom and Ames 1994). Of course, the reasons parents give for administering the physical abuse is usually punishment and discipline. As Straus says, “A relatively large amount of research has been done on the link between corporal punishment and aggression and delinquency. Almost all of those studies show that children who are hit by their parents tend to have higher rates of hitting and other aggression” (Straus 1994, p.100).

Straus has also reviewed the connection between corporal punishment, violence and crime. Studies have shown a connection between corporal punishment and increased aggression and violence in children. Children whose parents hit them are twice as likely to attack a brother or sister. Adults who were hit as adolescents are more likely to hit their spouses. Teenagers who were hit by their parents are more likely to steal and physically assault someone. The more corporal punishment parents use, the greater the chances of delinquent behavior among their children. States where teachers are allowed to hit children have a higher rate of student violence. Corporal punishment and physical abuse overlap: the more a parent was hit as an adolescent, the greater was the chance the parent will physically abuse his or her own child [2].

In many families, physical abuse is disguised as discipline, carrying on an intergenerational pattern of using violence in an attempt to manage children. And parents, being only human, sometimes lose control and what was meant as a slap turns into a punch, a kick, a serious injury, and sometimes even death. There can be a fine line between physical punishment and physical abuse. There is a growing body of evidence that has clearly demonstrated the connection between physical abuse and many other problems including: increased likelihood of the use of alcohol, marijuana, and almost all other drugs for both males and females (Harrison, Fulkerson, and Beebe, 1997); more lifetime and current episodes of depression, post-traumatic stress, and substance abuse (Duncan et al. 1996); a significant impact on the likelihood of arrest for delinquency, adult criminality, and violence (Maxfield and Widom, 1996); increased rates of psychopathology, sexual difficulties, decreased self-esteem, and interpersonal problems (Muller et al., 1996); increased risk for promiscuity, prostitution, and teenage pregnancy (Widom and Kuhns, 1996); increased risk for later aggressive behavior as well as the development of deviant patterns of processing social information which may mediate the development of aggressive behavior (Dodge, Bates and Pettit. 1990).

In addition to what we know now about the effects of abuse, John Bowlby noted over thirty years ago, that there are three basic experiences that can produce a sociopathic character: 1) Lack of any
opportunity for forming an attachment to a mother figure during the first three years; 2) Deprivation for a limited period - at least three months probably more than six - during the first three or four years; 3) Changes from one mother figure to another during the same period. Bowlby’s words ring out down through the decades, “Yet so far, no country has tackled this problem seriously... the twin problems of neglectful parents and deprived children are viewed fatalistically and left to perpetuate themselves” (Jones 1968, p.122).

In summary, corporal punishment has also been highly correlated with attacks on siblings, attacks on spouses, increased street crime, juvenile delinquency, and a generally accepted, socially learned acceptance and encouragement of violence (Straus 1994). Children learn that violence is a way to express feelings, solve problems, get what you want, feel strong, feel safe, and feel good. Some children learn these lessons better than others. Some children never try anything else, because the violence always works. These kids are labeled “bad” everywhere - in school, by their families, by their peers and neighbors. We know that many of these children are acting-out the covert pathology of their family systems, at least at first. But after awhile, being “bad” becomes an identity - a way of defining yourself and reality. Unfortunately, in our culture being “bad” carries a great deal of status. It is certainly preferable to being “weak”, a “sissy”, “womanish”, or “childish”. Can you imagine how much glamour would be lost if the violent bully on television was widely viewed as an overgrown two-year old throwing tantrums instead of a tough guy?

Given these facts, which have been accumulating from studies over the past fifty years, we can conclude that it would be best if parents could learn to use other forms of managing children. Without encouragement to do so by their cultural milieu, however, it is unlikely that the sea change suggested by DeMaissue in the shift to a Helping Mode from the Socializing Mode can be accomplished despite such clear indications of widespread negative effects. What can be said with confidence at this point is that child-rearing practices, including normative violence from parents to children, is one of the key factors underlying the society's problem with violence.

Obviously, not everyone who is hit as a child ends up as a criminal. Many other factors in a loving family attenuate the affects of violence. Still, as we will discuss in detail later, we know that any experience of physiological hyperarousal experienced in association with helpless terror can have profound and far-reaching negative consequences for the child. Whenever a child is hit we must be willing to make an informed decision about whether it is really “worth it”, whether the supposed gain is ever worth the very real risks. Since adult behavior is conditioned by childhood experience it is time that we asked ourselves the more general question whether hitting children results in producing adults who are prepared to run a democracy. Do we want adults who are fearful, who think poorly under stress, who are blindly obedient to authority and who see violence as the appropriate response in dealing with others? If not, then we had better consider ending the routine abuse of power between adults and children. (p.19-25)

In addition to the proximal exposure to trauma and its effect in this generation, there is a burgeoning amount of literature that indicates the very real dangers of intergenerational transmission of the effects of trauma. This has been studied most thoroughly in children of Holocaust survivors (Danielli, 1985) and
is succinctly summed up in one sentence, “The children of survivors show symptoms which would be expected if they actually lived through the Holocaust” (Barocas & Barocas as quoted in Herzog, 1982). Transgenerational transmission has also been well documented among populations who have been abused and neglected in childhood (Egeland and Susman-Stillman, 1996; Main & Hess, 1990; Oliver, 1993; Zeanah & Zeanah, 1989). (p.15-16)

How Families Can Promote Resilience
Families can promote resilience in some clearly defined ways. In the studies undertaken by Virginia Demos, the families who showed high resilience shared certain characteristics:

- They maximized opportunities of the shared experience of good feelings by doing things that made each other feel good as frequently as possible.
- They were quick to re-establish good feelings after there was a break like an angry scolding or an experience of bad feelings on the part of the child.
- They found ways to help their children when they were overwhelmed by bad feelings like distress, anger, fear, or shame by acknowledging the negative feeling and helping child reestablish a positive feeling [6].

The management of positive and negative emotional states is extremely important and can be learned by anyone, thus increasing the number of options we have in dealing with other people and increasing the chances for resilient types of responses to stress. Perhaps the most overlooked parental failure is the tendency of parents to focus on behavior and completely overlook the sequence of feelings that the child experiences and as a consequence, the most powerful tool in shaping behavior is lost.

Rutter (1990) has explored the very important concept of “turning points”, the particular experiences in a child’s life that can change the developmental trajectory from that point on. He focuses on the kinds of protective processes that can be put into place to reduce the risk of damage and increase the likelihood of resiliency. The first necessary step in supporting protective processes is to reduce the risk impact. The first and most logical way of accomplishing this task is to alter the child’s exposure to, or intimate involvement with, the risk situation. But when this is not possible then sometimes it is possible to alter the meaning or riskiness of the risk variable for that child. This introduces the concept of stress inoculation - controlled exposure to stress in circumstances in which successful coping or adaptation can take place. Thus children who are exposed to normal experiences of separation like baby-sitters in situations that are not overwhelming begin to develop coping skills that then can serve them when they are exposed to a higher degree of separation stress. Stress inoculation involves the promotion of coping with the hazards when the exposure is of a type and degree that is manageable in the context of the child’s capacities and social situation.
A second vital protective process is the reduction of negative chain reactions. Negative chain reactions occur, for instance when the child is traumatized in some way, say sexually abused, and then further traumatized when the caregivers deny the abuse or blame the child. Often the chain reaction response does more long-term harm then the trauma itself. Here the protective function does not simply reside within the individual but within the interaction between the individual and other people’s reactions.

A third protective process resides in the establishment and maintenance of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Two types of experiences are most influential: the establishment of secure and harmonious love relationships and success in accomplishing tasks that are identified by individuals as central to their interests. Various kinds of research studies including short-term prospective studies, retrospective recall of adults, and intergenerational studies of high-risk populations all show that early childhood attachments provide a degree of protection against later risk environments. It is important to remember however, that self-concepts continue to be modified according to the nature of life experiences encountered so that positive interpersonal experiences in adulthood can also be transformative.

The fourth protective process includes anything that opens up opportunities for children to find other alternative sources of empathic experiences with others, other coping strategies, other ways of getting their needs met [7].

**Recommendations from Resilient Adults**

Resilient adults have made some constructive recommendations for anyone hoping to enhance resiliency in others. They recommend a focus on strengths, on how the person survived as well as they have rather than a focus on weakness, vulnerability, or pathology. Helpers need to ask, “What were the coping skills that were effective, even if in a limited way”? It is important to help the person look for the beacons of hope that have sustained them - in themselves and in others. These beacons often come in the form of surrogates who become symbols of opportunity, of possibility - a teacher, a therapist, a family friend, a distant relative. It is vital never to underestimate the importance of simple kindness in the lives of those who are downtrodden and betrayed. Even small doses of kindness can last a lifetime in memory. Likewise it is important to openly admire the successes of each person - their capacity to learn and love which overcomes their history of abuse.

Another interesting recommendation made by resilient survivors relates to the qualities inherent in the helper, in the person - therapist, physician, teacher, or friend - who hopes to be of help to others:

> “Clinicians and educators need to have both technical knowledge and ability; but in addition, I feel it’s absolutely essential for the person to be highly developed as a human being: capable of caring for others, capable of loving others, ...a realized person. You cannot get good work done by defective individuals who just have the right credentials. ... The people who helped me the most helped me partially because of who they were, modeling for me how to be as a human being.” (Higgins, 1994, p.327)[8].

As Higgins points out, it is important that anyone hoping to help encourage resilience in others recognize that these are people who have grown up with models of exploitation, cruelty, and boundary
violation. They lack a positive model of human interaction and often do not recognize how bizarre their childhood treatment has been. This is an essential role of other people - to communicate positive regard, to provide an alternative to abusive relationships, to validate their perceptions of the destructive nature of their experiences. (p.252.-254)


References

Link to Parenting Points by Dr. Sandra L. Bloom