

# PLAIN TALK ABOUT SPANKING

**Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education** (PTAVE) offers this publication for the benefit of children everywhere. The ideas that you will read here are not new or revolutionary. There have always been wise and perceptive people in every civilized culture who have advocated nonviolent methods for socializing children. But, for the most part, their good advice has been ignored or rejected and the consequences to humanity have been incalculable. In these few pages we have attempted to summarize their message and offer it once again.

“Give me different mothers, and I will give you a different world.”

**St. Augustine**

“The Babe that weeps the Rod beneath  
Writes Revenge in realms of death.”

**William Blake**

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## By Jordan Riak

Today, one finds no support for spanking in the scientific literature. This opinion, shared by mental health and child development experts, and other professionals in related fields, has been evolving for many decades and its beginnings can be found centuries ago.

That is not to say there are no advocates for physical punishment of children, as indeed it would be false to claim there are no advocates for physical punishment of wives. Both practices are widespread and people who hit other people usually believe they have valid reasons.

### The Lasting Effect on Children

Some researchers claim that every act of violence by an adult toward a child, no

matter how brief or how mild, leaves an emotional scar that lasts a lifetime. To some extent we can demonstrate this from personal experience. Most of us must admit that the most vivid and most unpleasant childhood memories are those of being hurt by our parents. Some people find the memory of such events so unpleasant they pretend that they were trivial, even funny. You'll notice that they smile when they describe what was done to them. It is shame, not pleasure, that makes them smile. As a protection against present pain, they disguise the memory of past feelings.

In an attempt to deny or minimize the dangers of spanking, many spankers have been heard to argue, “Spanking is very different from child abuse,” or “A little smack on the bottom never did anybody any harm.” But they are wrong.

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A good comparison to spanking is exposure to chemical compounds containing lead. In earlier generations, most people lived in houses painted with lead based paint, and most survived with no apparent ill effects. Were they smart, or just lucky? Today, we don't do that anymore. We know better. Likewise, informed parents recognize that spanking children is like exposing them to a dangerous toxin. No good can result and the risk is great.

But some parents will ask, "How can you claim to be a responsible parent if you don't grab the child who is about to run out into traffic and deliver a good smack so that your warnings about the danger of the street will be remembered?"

In fact, being spanked throws children into a state of powerful emotional confusion making it difficult for them to learn the lessons adults claim they are trying to teach. Delivering a so-called "good smack" neither diminishes the adult's anger nor improves the child's behavior. Adults who spank tend to get angrier; spanked children tend to behave worse. And spanking's negative effect on a child can be long-lasting or permanent. It does not teach children that cars and trucks are dangerous. It teaches them that the grownups on whom they depend are dangerous.

### **Lost Trust**

The spanked child is less able to regard the parent as a source of love, protection and comfort which are vital to every child's healthy development. In the child's eyes the parent now appears to be the source of danger and pain.

Fear, resentment and mistrust that result from spanking, undermine children's feelings of attachment to the most important adults in their lives. A child who is thus betrayed, like the child who is denied adequate food, warmth or rest, suffers and

fails to mature in the best possible way.

### **Threats**

Some parents rarely spank or don't spank at all, but are always threatening to do terrible things. "If you don't keep quiet while I'm on the phone, I'm going to sew your mouth shut with a big needle," or "Better watch out, or somebody is going to chop your fingers off. That's what they do to naughty children who are always touching things they shouldn't." They find it easy to manage children by these means—at least temporarily.

At first, while children believe adults' threats, they obey out of fear. But they soon learn to sneak and tell lies in order to evade the terrible punishments they believe are in store for them. Later, as they discover the threats are empty, they conclude (correctly) that the grown-ups they once trusted are in fact not trustworthy.

When trust between children and their closest caretakers is damaged in this way, the children's ability to form trusting relationships with others is also damaged. This may render them incapable of ever achieving cooperation or intimacy with anyone. People who have been damaged in this way tend to see all relationships as negotiations, as deals to be won or lost. They see innocence, honesty and trustfulness in others as weaknesses to be exploited, exactly as it was once done to them.

### **Force**

Spanking teaches children that human interaction is based on force, that might makes right. The more a child is spanked, the greater is the likelihood that that child will become an adult who deals with others, not by reason and good example, but by force. What kind of person are we describing?

The bully is such a person. The rapist is such a person. The wife beater is such a person. The quack, the cheat, the con artist, the crook—each of these is such a person. And so are cowards and hangers-on who derive their power secondhand by clinging to such people as those we've just listed.

### **Spousal Battery and Spanking**

In the overwhelming majority of cases, husbands and wives whose relationship includes violence are also violent toward their children. Such parents surely were spanked when they were little and witnessed others being spanked.

Battering and battered spouses who spank their children are raising them to be batterers and victims exactly like themselves. The children learn from their parents' example that the way to vent frustration, express disapproval and assert authority is by hitting someone smaller and weaker than themselves. They see this principle demonstrated every time they witness their parents fighting, as well as every time they are on the receiving end of violent punishments.

They learn that once they are big enough and strong enough, they can control others by threatening or hurting them. They learn that it is okay for husbands and wives to batter each other and for adults to batter children.

When children, whose personalities have been formed in violent households, grow up and produce children of their own, they find it very difficult to break free from the behaviors they have witnessed and experienced. The skills they apply to family life will be the poor ones they learned from their parents, and they are likely to carry on the cycle of violence through their own innocent children.

As spanking disappears from family life, other forms of domestic violence will also disappear. Not before.

### **Escalation**

Physical injuries and deaths of children caused by their caretakers often are the consequence of physical punishment carried to extremes. Perpetrators of even the most horrendous acts against children typically explain that the child's misbehavior called for punishment, and the outcome was unintended or accidental. Many of the babies who die annually "falling out of the crib," "falling down the stairs" or because they "just stopped breathing for no reason" would be added to the statistic of non-accidental deaths if the truth were known. Sometimes the victim is blamed for his own misfortune, e.g, the child "bruises easily," "is accident prone" or "refused to stand still while being punished, and that's why the belt buckle caught his lip."

Spankers are often heard reciting the soothing catchphrase about never spanking in anger. This bogus claim belies what typically motivates people who hit children: anger. Many spankers are habituated to the act because it provides an instant outlet for feelings of frustration and anger — not because they've found it an effective way to improve a child's behavior. Because anger, by its very nature, tends to escalate as it is indulged, there is no safe way to hit a child.

### **Sexual Molestation and Spanking**

Spanked children don't regard their bodies as being their own personal property. Spanking trains them to accept the idea that adults have absolute authority over their bodies, including the right to inflict pain. And being hit on the buttocks teaches them that even their sexual areas are subject to the will of adults. The child who submits to a spanking on Monday is not likely to say "No" to a molester on Tuesday. People who sexually molest or exploit children know this. They

stalk potential victims among children who have been taught to “obey or else” because such children are the easiest targets.

### **Spanking the Buttocks and Sexual Development**

Spanking of the buttocks can stimulate immature sexual feelings in some children. They have no control over those feelings, nor do they understand what is happening to them. The tragic consequence for some of these children is that they form a connection between pain, humiliation and sexual arousal that endures for the rest of their lives. Even though they may marry, raise families, hold responsible positions in the community and show no signs of emotional disturbance, they may be secretly and shamefully tormented by a need which, in some cases, compels them to hire prostitutes whom they spank or from whom they receive spankings. The pornography industry does a thriving business catering to the needs of these unfortunate individuals.

Medical science has long recognized and documented in great detail the link between buttocks-beating in childhood and the later development of unnatural sexual desires and behaviors. This should be reason enough never to spank a child.

### **Physical Danger of Hitting the Buttocks**

Located deep in the buttocks is the sciatic nerve, the largest nerve in the body. A severe blow to the buttocks, particularly with an instrument such as a piece of wood, could cause bleeding in the muscles that surround that nerve, possibly injuring it and causing impairment to the involved leg.

The very delicate tail bone at the base of spine is also susceptible to injury when a child is hit there. And when children are required to bend over for beatings, their sex organs may be injured. Dislocation of the tail bone and bruising the sex organs as a

result of violent punishments are frequently reported by hospital authorities.

Some people, in their attempt to justify battering children’s buttocks, claim that God or nature intended that part of the anatomy for spanking. That claim is nonsense. No part of the human body was made to be violated.

### **Physical Danger of Hitting the Hands**

The child’s hand is particularly vulnerable because its ligaments, nerves, tendons and blood vessels are close to the skin which has no underlying protective tissue. Striking the hands of younger children is especially dangerous to the growth plates in the bones which, if damaged, can cause deformity or impaired function. Striking a child’s hand can also cause fractures, dislocations and lead to premature osteoarthritis.

### **Shaking**

Being shaken can cause a child blindness, whiplash, brain damage and even death.

### **Spanking at Home, Performance in School**

Most teachers will tell you that the children who exhibit the most serious behavior problems at school are the ones who are the most mistreated at home. Children who are spanked at home have been conditioned to expect the same kind of management by authority figures outside the home. For many of these children, the battle zone which is their home life extends to school life. This sets them up for academic failure, dropout, clashes with juvenile authorities and eventually perhaps with the criminal justice system.

In their attempt to erect a shield against what they see as a comfortless, hostile world, these children naturally seek the company of other children with similar problems. “My parents and teachers don’t understand me—my friends do,” they say.

And they have good reason to believe that. This is one reason street gangs evolve and why they are especially attractive to children whose self-esteem has been ruined by spanking, whupping, paddling, switching, humiliation, insults, threats, relentless criticism, unreasonable restrictions and physical and emotional neglect.

We should not be surprised that many youngsters reject the adult world to the degree they believe it has rejected them. Nor should we be surprised that adolescents, who throughout childhood have been the brunt of violence, will utilize violence as soon as they are able. As it often turns out, the aggressiveness that many young people cultivate, believing it is essential to their survival, propels them toward failure or catastrophe. Our crowded prisons are proof of this.

Some teachers work tirelessly to redirect the aggressiveness which violence-ridden children have far too much of and instill trust which violence-ridden children have far too little of. But that is a monumental task requiring specialized skills and a level of dedication which not all teachers possess or can maintain for extended periods. It requires extraordinary resources unavailable to the public school systems. School dropout and juvenile delinquency would diminish substantially if only it were possible to persuade parents and other caretakers to stop socializing children in ways guaranteed to make them antisocial and/or self-destructive. In other words, to stop the spanking and start the nurturing

### **Spanking, Smoking, Drinking and Drugs**

To be spanked is a degrading, humiliating experience. The spanked child absorbs not only the blows, but the message they convey: "You're worthless. I reject you!" That message powerfully influences the child's developing personality. It instills self-hatred.

Sooner or later every child is exposed to substances that promise instant relief from feelings of worthlessness and rejection. Everywhere people can be seen putting things into their bodies to make themselves feel good. It is difficult to convince a child who is suffering that such relief is an illusion, that one cannot rebuild damaged self-esteem by means of something swallowed, inhaled or injected, but can easily bury it deeper under the weight of new problems.

### **Spanking and Criminal Behavior**

Everyone is familiar with the list of social maladies believed to be at the root of violent criminal behavior: poverty, discrimination, family breakdown, narcotics, gangs and easy access to deadly weapons. And it's clear that every item in the above list contributes to violence and crime. However, one key ingredient is rarely acknowledged—spanking.

In 1940, researchers Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck began their famous study of delinquent and nondelinquent boys. They discovered how certain early childhood influences cause children to develop antisocial, violent behaviors. They showed that the first signs of delinquency often appear as early as three—long before children come into contact with influences outside the home. The Gluecks showed that parents who fail to manage their children calmly, gently and patiently, but instead rely on physical punishment, tend to produce aggressive, assaultive children. The more severe and the earlier the mistreatment, the worse the outcome.

The Gluecks also found that the lowest incidence of antisocial behavior is always associated with children who are reared from infancy in attentive, supportive, nonviolent, non-spanking families.

The message here for all parents who want their children never to see the inside of a jail or prison is a simple one: guide gently and patiently—never hit.

### **Spanking, Racism and Collective Hatreds**

Spanking fills children with anger and the urge to retaliate. But this urge is almost never directly acted upon. Even the most severely spanked children, as a general rule, will not strike back at those who have hurt them. Instead, they are likely to seek relief in fantasy where they can safely vent their anger against make-believe adversaries. Sometimes younger brothers or sisters or family pets serve this purpose. Popular entertainment also caters to this need.

As children grow and come under the influence of the prejudices of their community, their anger can be easily channeled toward approved scapegoats. Hate cults and extremist political factions beckon to them with open arms, offering an opportunity to convert fantasy into reality. In every generation, more than a few seize that offer. Their behaviors constitute the worst fallout of the spanking tradition.

### **Spanking at School**

Throughout the developed world spanking by teachers has almost disappeared. It is illegal in every European country and many developing countries. (In Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Norway and Sweden no one, including a parent, may legally spank any child in any circumstance.) Among the major, developed industrial nations, the U.S. is the most resistant to reform in this regard. But gradually more states are banning school corporal punishment and in the states that allow it a growing number of school districts are wisely forbidding the practice.

Still, there remain many uninformed teachers and school administrators who, like many uninformed parents, persist in believing that it is okay to manage pupils by means of physical violence or the threat of it. What should enlightened, responsible parents do?

If you knew that a school bus had bald tires and faulty brakes, you would not let your child ride that bus and you would demand that your school authorities correct the problem immediately. If you knew that the air ducts in your school were contaminated with asbestos, you'd remove your child immediately and alert other parents to the danger.

Corporal punishment is no different. It is very dangerous and all sensible people in the community should immediately unite in opposition to it.

As a parent you have a right and an obligation to protect your child from known danger. Inform your local, regional and state education authorities that no one has your permission, nor the moral right, to endanger your child at school.

### **Spanking and Brain Development**

In early childhood, the brain develops faster than any other organ in the body. By age 5, the brain reaches about 90 percent of its adult weight, and by 7, it is fully grown. This makes early childhood a very sensitive and critical period in brain development.

Stress associated with pain and fear caused by spanking can negatively affect the development and function of a child's brain. It is precisely during this period of great plasticity and vulnerability that many children are subjected to physical punishment. The effect can be a derailing of natural, healthy brain growth resulting in

life-long and irreversible abnormalities.

According to researcher Dr. Martin Teicher of McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts, “We know that an animal exposed to stress and neglect in early life develops a brain that is wired to experience fear, anxiety and stress. We think the same is true of people,” (“Child Abuse Changes the Developing Brain,” Yahoo! News, Dec. 29, 2000).

In Teicher’s article, “The Neurobiology of Child Abuse,” *Scientific American*, March 2002, he wrote, “New brain imaging surveys and other experiments have shown that child abuse can cause permanent damage to the neural structure and function of the developing brain itself. This grim result suggests that much more effort must be made to prevent childhood abuse and neglect before it does irrevocable harm to millions of young victims (p. 70)... Society reaps what it sows in the way it nurtures children (p. 75).”

No responsible parent would deliberately jeopardize a child’s normal brain development, yet that is precisely what spankers unwittingly do.

#### WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

“Any form of corporal punishment or ‘spanking’ is a violent attack upon another human being’s integrity. The effect remains with the victim forever and becomes an unforgiving part of his or her personality — a massive frustration resulting in a hostility which will seek expression in later life in violent acts towards others. The sooner we understand that love and gentleness are the only kinds of called-for behavior towards children, the better. The child, especially, learns to become the kind of human being that he or she has experienced. This should be fully understood by all caregivers.”  
**Ashley Montagu**, Anthropologist

“Corporal punishment of children actually interferes with the process of learning and with their optimal development as socially responsible adults. We feel it is important for public health workers, teachers and others concerned for the emotional and physical health of children and youth to support the adoption of alternative methods for the achievement of self-control and responsible behavior in children and adolescents.”

**Dr. Daniel F. Whiteside**, Assistant Surgeon General, Department of Health & Human Services (Administration of President Ronald Reagan)

“Punitive measures whether administered by police, teachers, spouses or parents have well-known standard effects: (1) escape—education has its own name for that: truancy, (2) counterattack—vandalism on schools and attacks on teachers, (3) apathy—a sullen do-nothing withdrawal. The more violent the punishment, the more serious the by-products.”

**B. F. Skinner**, Ph.D., author, Professor of Psychology, Harvard

“Corporal punishment trains children to accept and tolerate aggression. It always figures prominently in the roots of adolescent and adult aggressiveness, especially in those manifestations that take an antisocial form such as delinquency and criminality.”

**Philip Greven**, Professor of History, Rutgers University

“I have always been an advocate for the total abolition of corporal punishment and I believe the connection with pornography that is so oriented has its roots in our tradition of beating children.”

**Gordon Moyes**, D. D., Pastor, Uniting Church, Superintendent of the Wesley Central Mission, Sydney, Australia

“The much-touted ‘religious argument’ to support corporal punishment is built upon a few isolated quotes from the Book of Proverbs. Using the same kind of selective reading, one could just as easily cite the Bible as an authority for the practice of slavery, the rigid suppression of women, polygamy, incest and infanticide. It seems to me that the brutal and vindictive practice of corporal punishment cannot be reconciled with the major themes of the New Testament which teach love and forgiveness and a respect for the beauty and dignity of children, and which overwhelmingly reject violence and retribution as a means of solving human conflicts.”

**Thomas E. Sagendorf**, United Methodist Pastor, Toledo, Ohio

“The development of self-control, which we call conscience, results from the appropriate interaction of children with their caretakers. Children’s experience of love and respect promotes the development of conscience, whereas the experience of fear or pain, as results from spanking and paddling, interferes with this development. Physical punishment of children must end if our society is going to become one that is governed by conscience and self-control rather than be governed by their opposites.”

**H. Patrick Stern**, M.D., Asst. Prof. of Pediatrics, Psychiatry and Behavioral Pediatrics, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

“Infliction of pain or discomfort, however minor, is not a desirable method of communicating with children.”

**American Medical Association**, House of Delegates, 1985

“Slavish discipline makes a slavish temper... Beating them, and all other sorts of slavish and corporal punishments, are not the discipline fit to be used in the education of those we would have wise, good, and

ingenuous men.”

**John Locke**, 1632-1704, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” 1692

“Chide not the pupil hastily, for that will both dull his wit and discourage his diligence, but [ad]monish him gently, which shall make him both willing to amend and glad to go forward in love and hope of learning... Let the master say, ‘Here ye do well.’ For I assure you there is no such whetstone to sharpen a good wit and encourage a love of learning as his praise...”

In mine opinion, love is fitter than fear, gentleness better than beating, to bring up a child rightly in learning.”

**Roger Ascham**, (Tutor to Queen Elizabeth I), *The Schoolmaster*, England, published circa 1568

“Children ought to be led to honorable practices by means of encouragement and reasoning, and most certainly not by blows and ill treatment.”

**Plutarch**, circa 46-120 A.D., “The Education of Children,” Vol. I, *Moralia*, Ancient Greece

“It is a disgusting and slavish treatment... When children are beaten, pain or fear frequently have the result of which it is not pleasant to speak and which are likely subsequently to be a source of shame, shame which unnerves and depresses the mind and leads the child to shun the light of day and loathe the light... I will spend no longer time on this matter. We know enough about it already.”

**Quintilian**, circa 35-95 A.D., *Institutes of Oratory*, Ancient Rome

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q:** What do virtually all juvenile delinquents have in common?

**A:** They have been raised by spankers.

**Q:** What was a common feature of the childhoods of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein and Charles Manson?

**A:** Each one was relentlessly, severely, physically punished as a child.

**Q:** What do prisoners on death row all have in common?

**A:** Plenty of spankings during childhood.

**Q:** What do rapists, arsonists, terrorists, torturers, serial killers, mass murderers, suicide bombers, serial bombers, kidnappers, snipers, assassins, muggers, product tamperers, vandals, spouse batterers and stalkers have in common?

**A:** Violent upbringing.

**Q:** Which child is destined never to join the company of felons?

**A:** One who is raised in a nurturing, attentive, supportive, non-spanking family.

**Q:** To turn a friendly puppy into a vicious guard dog, what must you do to it?

**A:** Restrict its movement and beat it often.

### HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There are people in your community who have never heard the ideas expressed in this publication. It's time they heard, don't you agree?

You can help plant the seeds of a more caring, more cooperative and less violent next generation by sharing this information with others—with friends, co-professionals, neighbors, relatives, the parents of your children's friends, community leaders, religious leaders, your children's teachers, local and state education authorities and your representatives in government. We believe everyone should hear this message.

We know that some people in your community will reject our conclusions about

the dangers of spanking. Some people will refuse to think about it or may even become annoyed or hostile because this information makes them feel extremely uncomfortable. That doesn't discourage us. It shouldn't discourage you. There are others who want to know why the old familiar method of socializing children works so poorly.

Also, there are those who already are raising their children without violence but who need to be reassured that they are doing the right thing. Your role is to reach out to those people and to let them know what you know about this matter. Put a copy of *Plain Talk...* in their hands. And tell them about our Web site, "Project NoSpank" at [www.nospank.net](http://www.nospank.net) where they can learn the 1001 reasons to refrain from spanking.

We are confident that some day soon civilized humanity will look back with astonishment and pity at the time when people believed hitting children was good for them.

### RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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**Alan DeWitt Button.** *The Authentic Child.* New York: Random House, 1969.

**Susan Forward.** *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life.* New York: Bantam Books, 1989.

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**Thomas Gordon.** *Teaching Children Self-Discipline At Home and At School.* New York: Random House, 1989. [PTAVE strongly recommends Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.)* and *Teacher Effectiveness Training (T.E.T.)*]

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**Mitch Hall.** *The Plague of Violence: a preventable epidemic.* Checkmate Press, www.CheckmateNow.org, 2002.

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**Irwin A. Hyman and Pamela A. Snook.** *Dangerous Schools: What We Can Do About the Physical and Emotional Abuse of Our Children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999

**Dorothy Otnow Lewis.** *Guilty by Reason of Insanity - A Psychiatrist Explores the Minds of Killers.* New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998.

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**Michael J. Marshall.** *Why Spanking Doesn't Work.* Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2002.

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**Jane & James Ritchie.** *Spare the Rod.* Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.

**Murray A. Straus.** *Beating the Devil out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families.* New York: Free Press, 1994.

**Felicity de Zulueta.** *From Pain to Violence: The Traumatic Roots of Destructiveness.* London: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994.