



*Lucy Daniels*

*Center for Early Childhood*

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Spanking Children**

The Lucy Daniels Center believes that spanking children is unreasonable and unjustified. Abundant evidence relates physical discipline to conflictual, coercive, and even to abusive parent-child relationships and aggressive children. This undermines the goals of fostering a kind, respectful, and moral child.

**Being out of control:** There are a number of reasons that we recommend against using physical consequences. The first concerns the relationship between physical consequences and parental anger. Virtually all parents become tense and frustrated when they are angry with their children whom they deeply love. Parents who use physical discipline may use this strategy when they are the most overwrought and lacking their best judgment. A child's security is undermined if she or he senses that a parent, the child's basis of security, is momentarily out of control.

**Confusing messages:** Physical discipline confuses parental messages to children. Parents often tell children that they must solve problems without physical force, even it seems that there is no other option. This message is undermined when parents resort to physical force because *they feel* that there is no better option. It is as if the parent is saying, "I can hurt physically because I have good reasons, and you can not hurt physically because you don't have good reasons." With such a coercive and contradictory message, parents may be inadvertently providing a license to some children to "be like them," and to find solutions in actions (acting out) rather than through words.

**Excessive Use of Power:** Physical force is also problematic because it is based on an *excessive* use of power. This is the essence of an authoritarian discipline model. There are usually negative consequences when children are forced to submit and comply with authoritarianism. Such submission may lead to a compliance that is based upon shutting down important parts of the child's personality. Alternatively, it may lead to "joining in," via identifications with the parent that get expressed ultimately in patterns such as bullying, mistreatment of members of the opposite sex, and acting out. Here is an illustration of how physical punishment can contribute to unfavorable development:

*Julian was raised in an environment in which there was little room for misbehavior. Although there were many loving and supportive aspects of his relationships with his parents, Julian was physically punished and shamed in other ways when he misbehaved. He came to feel ashamed about himself. In order to avoid triggering these feelings, he developed distaste for challenging academic and athletic situations in which inevitable frustrations might activate these painful feelings of inadequacy. In early adolescence, Julian faced new challenges requiring a confident autonomous self that he did not possess. He began acting like a teen-age version of a two-year-old who could only feel autonomous by acting in opposition. Julian became involved with drugs and sexuality. Although it seemed as if his problems began with adolescence, the dramatic behaviors were an expression of pre-existing problems that had been relatively silent.*

**Respect for own body:** There are other problems with hitting children. Physical discipline can interfere with a child's capacity to develop respect for her or his body and the bodies of others. The intrusion into a child's bodily space and feelings can also interfere with a child's effort to establish physical and emotional boundaries. Being physically hurt increases the level of hostility about a parent that a child will have to resolve, which is never a good thing. Furthermore, hitting confuses the child about the role of a care-taking parent who is now hurting them; children feel best about themselves when they feel best about their relationship with their parents. For many parents, hitting affects their comfort in their relationship with their child

because they feel guilty and ashamed for doing something to their child that they would rather not do.

**Mild corporal punishment:** Some parents feel that mild physical force that does not cause pain is acceptable. Such a use of physical discipline is indeed less problematic than more painful forms of physical discipline, but it is not without profound problems. A child's hands and bottom are particularly psychologically important and vulnerable physical regions. Hands are a child's physical emissaries, the primary vehicle through which she or he explores, learns, and impacts upon the world. The bottom is a child's most private and intimate area, even involved in a child's developing sexuality. Every slap on a hand or pop on the bottom potentially creates shame and inhibition in a child's zest for discovery and exploration, or developing feeling about sexuality.

**No other option?:** Sometimes parents say that they only spank when there is no other option, or when the situation is urgent. A common instance of this occurs when a young child runs into the street, or sticks her or his hands near a hot stove. With forethought, these situations can be managed without physical means.

*Sheena, age 2, was playing near a road. Her mother kept a watchful eye, only a few steps away. As Sheena drifted closer to the road, her mother swooped down, lifted her up, and with a fear-laden face, said, "Sheena, no, no, no, that's dangerous, Mommy is very worried, no." Sheena reacted with appropriate alarm. The point was strongly made without degrading child and mother, and without communicating a message of badness. Sheena felt protected rather than reprimanded.*

Some parents say, "We have tried everything else, and spanking is the only thing that works." Certainly, some children will make behavioral changes more rapidly under the pressure of the humiliation and fear of physical pain. *However, the rate at which behavior is changed in discipline is a secondary goal:* the more important goal is the long-term outcome of a kind, respectful, and moral child. Every interchange between child and parent around discipline leaves a seed within the child that will flower someday. A parent's concern should be upon ensuring the beauty and vitality of the flower.

**Like parent like child:** Finally, some parents say something such as "I was spanked, and it didn't do me any harm. In fact, I always knew that it was for my benefit and it taught me lessons." To such a parent, we respond, "Yes, you learned lessons about misbehavior from corporal punishment. However, many have been raised without corporal punishment and learned the same lessons. Perhaps you are unable to recall some of the unsettling aspects of the experience, such as the humiliation and fear. And, as for the long-term effects, all adults are struggling with life with mixed emotional packages of feelings, attitudes, competencies, and conflicts. We do not think that spanking makes the optimal contribution to this mixed package, and we join you in wishing for your child, the best emotional package that we can help her or him achieve."