

Eight Good Reasons Not to Spank

by Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.

During a recent appearance on CNN, I was asked about proposed legislation in California that would make spanking young children a misdemeanor crime.

The CNN interviewer wanted to know why I (and most other parenting experts) do not believe that spanking is a useful parenting method. It should be noted that this show came on the heels of a breaking news story about a family who was asked to leave an airplane prior to takeoff when the parents could not get their three-year-old daughter off the cabin floor, where she was engaged in an all-out tantrum, and into her seat.

I did my best to give some reasons why spanking the child would not have been a good idea, but time was limited. Later I found the following anonymous message in my e-mail:

I'm watching you on CNN right now—I 100% disagree with you. Look how the “PC” police such as yourself has corrupted today's kids who are OUT OF CONTROL! It has worked since the beginning of time—what has changed?

The interview—and the e-mail—reminded me of the need to continue my lifelong mission of encouraging the use of better discipline methods.

The following **eight reasons not to spank** are excerpted from my new book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (Fireside/ Simon and Schuster, March 2007). I hope you find them useful.

1. It is too easy for a frustrated parent to cross the line from spanking to abusing.

The adrenaline rush that venting one’s frustrations and anger on a child can produce is a “high” that can become habit-forming, if not addictive. It feels good to let it out. Unfortunately, by the time the smoke clears, many parents have crossed the line from spanking to hitting, shaking, slapping and other forms of child abuse.

This is why even parent educators who advocate spanking say to NEVER spank while you are angry. Calm down first and then calmly approach your child later. Of course, once you have calmed down, you can usually think of better methods of handling the problem than spanking.

2. Spanking usually leads to more misbehavior.

The problem with spanking is that it does work...for the immediate misbehavior. Kids *will* “stop it this instant!” However, they also resent the spanking and seek out conscious or unconscious ways to get even. This usually takes the form of

more misbehavior later or even aggressive behavior against other kids.

3. Spanking teaches aggressive behavior.

Kids who are spanked learn to handle some problems by hitting or threatening to hit. Others find that their parents are too big to get even with, so they take it out on other kids. In either case, in this time of zero tolerance for violence, these kids wind up suspended or even expelled from school. We have to teach children that violence is only OK as a measure of restrained self-defense and never a way to “punish” others for misbehavior.

4. Spanking can damage your relationship with your child.

Even if you only spank a child one time, she may remember it the rest of her life and never feel quite as safe around you again. When you spank often, you create a climate of hurt and revenge that undermines much of the good in the relationship. You may be able to overcome this, but why take the chance when there are better methods available?

5. Spanking is out of step with the times.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, 95% or more of parents spanked—and I certainly got my share. I turned out OK....didn't I? The fact is that spanking actually worked better in the 50s and 60s than it does now. That autocratic parenting method evolved from medieval Europe, where hierarchy was very strict.

In today's democratic society, people are expected to behave in a respectful manner to each other, no matter how powerful. That's why we don't tolerate police brutality, public lashings or the stocks anymore. We teach our children to be respectful by treating them respectfully—even with discipline.

6. Spanking often leaves the parent feeling guilty.

Most parents are aware that spanking is now a controversial parenting method. The number of parents who spank has dropped from over 95% to about 50-60% in recent years. Even the American Academy of Pediatrics has come out against spanking. But even before this, many parents could sense that something was not right about hurting a child “for his own good,” and feel guilty afterwards. Parents need to parent from confidence in their methods, not guilt, and they can't do so when they intuitively know that what they are doing is off the mark.

7. If spanking worked, parenting would be easy.

When I ask groups of parents or professionals if they agree that parenting well is difficult, everyone raises a hand. We all know how difficult it is. That's why parent education is needed and why so many groups are sponsoring courses like Active Parenting.

I took my family to the San Diego Zoo a while back and we visited the gorilla pen. A parent gorilla was eating when a child gorilla began annoying her. She simply took a massive arm and backhanded the misbehaving child across the

compound. My point? It doesn't take a high level of intelligence to hit a child, even to spank a child. If it worked then parenting would be **easy**, not difficult, because we could all do it. There must be more to effective discipline in our complex society than there is in the primitive society of apes.

8. **There are many more effective methods of discipline.**

The bottom line in all of this is that there are better ways to discipline kids in our modern society—methods such as polite requests, “I” messages, firm reminders, logical consequences, active problem-solving and the FLAC method taught in the Active Parenting programs. These methods not only solve behavior problems but also help build such qualities of character as responsibility, cooperation, courage, respect and even self-esteem. We teach them in our Active Parenting programs because they continue to work in ways that spanking can only temporarily, shall we say, “ape.” ■

About Michael Popkin

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at www.ActiveParenting.com.

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