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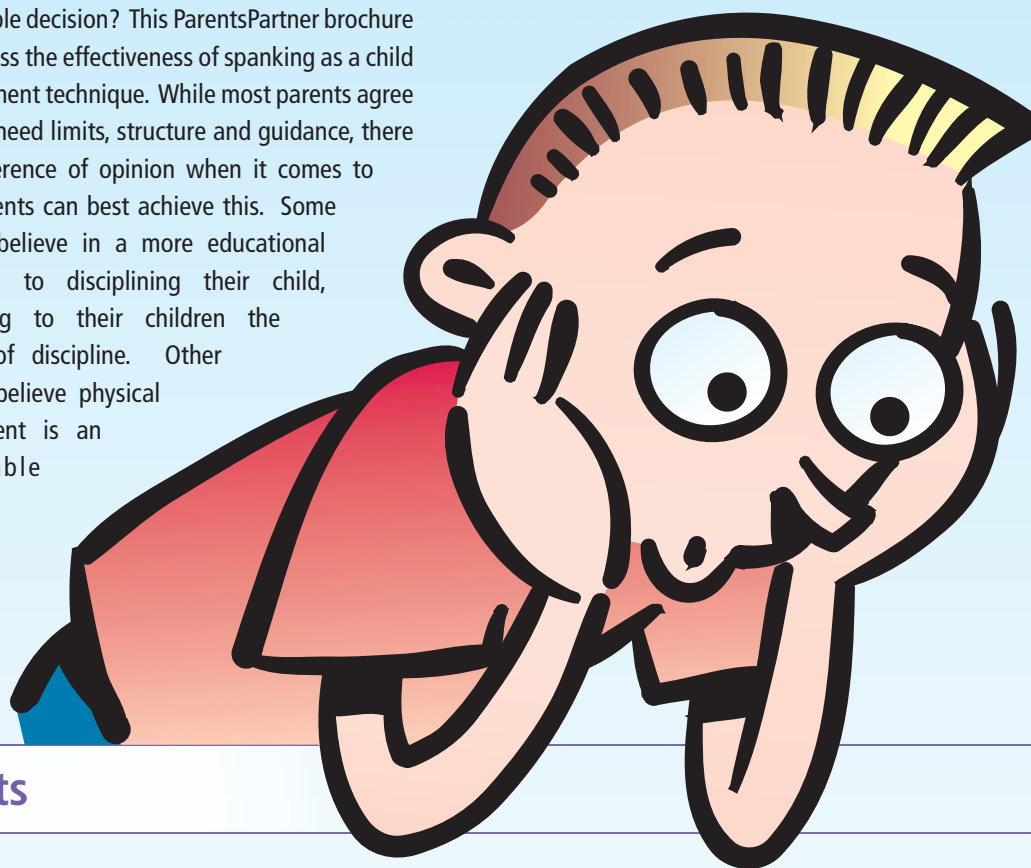
Spanking Your Child

To spank or not to spank?

Why All the Fuss?

Should parents spank their children? Does it really damage children? While many of you can verify from experience that spanking wasn't an issue for your parents, today there is a lot of debate over its use. The opinions range from politicians who advocate it should be prohibited by law, to child experts who argue it has its place in parenting. How could a universally used child management technique cause such debate? And if experts can't agree, how can a parent make a responsible decision? This ParentsPartner brochure will discuss the effectiveness of spanking as a child management technique. While most parents agree children need limits, structure and guidance, there is a difference of opinion when it comes to how parents can best achieve this. Some parents believe in a more educational approach to disciplining their child, explaining to their children the 'why's' of discipline. Other parents believe physical punishment is an acceptable

technique to help children learn socially acceptable behaviour. Berger (2001) states that most parents in America, Asia, Africa, and South America still believe spanking is acceptable, legitimate and necessary at times. A recent CHILD magazine survey (2,441 parents responded) found that only 4% of parents thought spanking was an acceptable discipline technique, but 20% admitted they used it on a regular basis.



Two insights

There are two important insights to guide parents in the use of child management techniques.

1 Parents need to understand why a child misbehaves. It's not a child's intention to deliberately annoy and 'push their parent's buttons.' While you might think your child is quietly scheming, "Let's make Dad & Mum's life hell," the reality is their misbehaviour is a signal that something needs attention - that's the real motivation behind misbehaviour.

2 The second insight is any discipline technique should work in harmony with how your child naturally learns. It's not rocket science to realise the futility of using a discipline technique that conflicts with how your child learns. The word 'discipline' comes from the Latin word disciplina, meaning instruction or method. When you discipline a child it should teach them something.

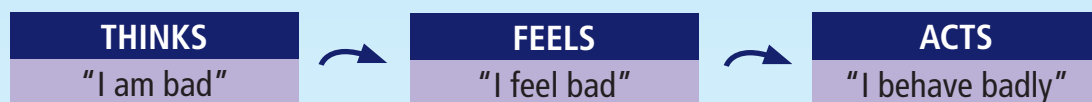


How Do Children Learn?

Drs. Brazelton and Greenspan, renowned child experts, argue, "All learning, even limits and structure, begins with nurturing care, from which children learn trust, warmth, intimacy, empathy, and attachment to those around them." Children have an inner drive to please their parents. Even the defiant, aggressive child wants their parent's approval. Children's behaviour comes from how they feel. Well behaved children feel loved, valued, and that they belong. Inside of them is this

reservoir of positive regard for their parents. This provides the motivation for them to do what the parent requires. They want to please their parent and they will resist losing that feeling of positive regard.

Conversely, if a child feels bad, they will act badly. Emotions cause behaviour; Positive emotions result in positive behaviours, negative emotions result in negative behaviour.



How your child feels about himself/herself has profound implications for their behaviour. If a child feels their parent thinks they are 'bad,' what's the point of trying to learn to do things differently? Why try to please a parent who thinks you are bad? That's why any child management technique must be based on nurturing care. If your technique causes your child to feel they are bad, there is no sense of loss, or disappointment, to motivate them from the inside to change their behaviour.

The real secret of effective parenting is to use techniques that help your child feel they are intrinsically loved and valued, even when they misbehave. Your child is always valuable, even when their behaviour is bad. It's the behaviour that's bad, not the child. How effective then, is spanking as a child management technique? Is punishment a useful technique to teach children appropriate behaviour? Here are some research findings.



1

Let's be honest, most parents use spanking to punish their children, not to teach them. Children do something wrong, which results in the frustrated and angry parent punishing them. While it might offer immediate relief to a frustrated parent, remember, the purpose of discipline is to teach children.

2

Physical punishment undermines a child's self-esteem. A child's behaviour is influenced by how they feel on the inside. Remember, behind every behaviour is an emotion that is causing the behaviour. A child who feels, "I am good," wants to maintain that emotion by behaving appropriately when they are corrected. Punishment though, gives the child the feeling that "I am bad." When a child feels they are bad, they usually behave badly too. Your discipline role is much easier when your child feels they are loved, valuable and capable.

3

Smacking can cause a child to be fearful. If fear is their motivation for pleasing you, they are likely to misbehave when they are away from you. Fear tends to be linked to a specific situation, because young children can't generalise to other situations. In other words, the fear of a spanking might stop them from bullying their younger sister at home, but when they get to Kindy they bully other children.

A child motivated by fear can also have some unforeseen and serious consequences as described by Drs. Brazelton and Greenspan, where they caution, "As children get older, those who have been disciplined through fear are more vulnerable to drinking, alcohol abuse, drugs, and delinquent behaviour."

4

Children learn by modelling, and spanking models aggression. Dr. Albert Bandurra, the Social Learning theorist, argues that any physical punishment provides the child with a powerful model of aggression. A child learns that if their parents can use force to control, they too can use force to achieve their own purposes in other situations. Parents often hit a child in response to their aggression. Yet, the punishment models the aggression that the child is being punished for! We live in a violent society and we give a wrong message to our children when we use force to settle issues.

5

It causes children to become aggressive. Martin (1975) concluded from a research study that children who were harshly punished at home were more likely to be aggressive with other children and teachers. Further, children, especially boys, who were harshly punished were more likely to become antisocial delinquents in adolescence. While spanking is hardly 'harsh punishment,' it does indicate though, that there is a relationship between physical force and child aggression.

6

Empathy is an important aspect of healthy development. Your child doesn't learn to be empathetic by being told to be nice to others. Children learn it when they see their parents model it through patient listening, and helping their child understand how others feel. "Children must experience adults doing for them what we expect children effectually to do for themselves and others," says Drs. Brazelton & Greenspan.

7

Studies indicate that a child who is punished soon learns to avoid the punitive parent, thus reducing the parents opportunity to correct inappropriate behaviour.

8

Physical punishment can lead to repressed anger that later gets expressed as teenage rebellion. Spanking is more likely to suppress, rather than change your child's behaviour. This can give a parent a false sense of security. A young child can be physically, or verbally forced into submission. The child's resulting compliant behaviour leads the parent to think the technique has been successful. While it might have stopped the inappropriate behaviour, the underlying repressed anger and resentment can later be expressed in rebellion.

9

The purpose of discipline is to teach your child self-discipline. Discipline is teaching, not punishment. And the primary goal of parent teaching is to raise a child who learns self-control. Smacking is a reactionary technique that acts as a quick fix - but quick fixes are superficial and ineffective long term.

10

Research has also discovered that children who are punished seldom associate it with the behaviour for which they are being punished. It is reasoned that the anger of the punishing parent is a stronger factor in the situation than the misbehaviour itself. The child tends to associate the punishing parent with pain, rather than the wrong behaviour.



11

Extensive research shows that when used frequently, punishment promotes only momentary compliance; it doesn't bring a lasting change in a child's behaviour. The attention smacking gives a child may actually lead them to repeat the misbehaviour just to get your attention. Better negative attention than no attention, even if it means a sore bottom!

12

Kochanska's (1997) research found that parents who use a positive educational approach are less likely to have preschoolers who violate their parental standards, and display problem behaviour at age 5.

Be focused on your outcome

While spanking might be a natural response from a frustrated parent, parents need to consider whether it's going to achieve the goal of raising a cooperative child. While it's obvious high force techniques like hitting, yelling, and shaming a child are highly damaging to a child (and should never be used), the issue of spanking is harder to assess. That's because it's a lot milder than other physical punishments. My wife asked me this question as I was researching this subject, "Who is the better parent: a parent who is uninvolved in their child's life, but never smacks them, or a parent who smacks their child, but is highly involved in their life?" The answer is obviously the last parent, because connection between parent-child is more important than the

occasional smack. But while in this situation spanking is the better of the two options, the real question parents should ask themselves is, "Am I using child management techniques that help my child be their very best?"



The final word

A positive parent-child relationship is the real key to effective parenting. While techniques have their place, nothing compares to the emotional connection you have with your child. Connection is all about influence; little connection means little influence, strong connection means strong influence. Effective parenting is choosing child management techniques that build a strong emotional connection with your child. If smacking damages the connection between you and your child, your discipline will be ineffective. And the real cost of ineffective discipline is when a child becomes a teenager and hasn't learned self discipline.

Dr. Richard Abidin, a highly esteemed parent researcher, provides parents with this advice, "Children who feel loved and accepted behave differently than when they feel unloved and

rejected. Usually children who feel loved and accepted are more cooperative, listen more carefully to what their parents say, and try to please and make their parents happy." While discipline is never easy for today's parents, don't use techniques that will make it harder.

See the ParentsPartner brochure entitled Discipline techniques for ideas that are more effective than smacking.

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Brazelton, T.B. & Greenspan, S.I. (2000). *The Irreducible Needs of Children*. Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing.