

A guide for responding to tough questions about corporal punishment



Corporal punishment: Punishment intended to cause physical pain on a person and is sometimes used to discipline children. This includes spanking or hitting a child with an open hand or object.

The use of corporal punishment on children is a controversial topic; however, it's an important topic that needs to be addressed. You may encounter varying levels of resistance. Resistance is encountered when we advocate for a change that someone is not ready for. A person may show resistance by ignoring, distracting, arguing or sharing excuses.

When met with resistance...roll with it! Avoid the temptation to persuade, argue or challenge the person's position on the topic. This approach will likely increase resistance and decrease the likelihood that change will happen.

Instead, acknowledge that you hear the other person's position. Empathize and use a non-judgmental approach to gain an understanding of their opinion. Ask questions to show interest. Gently help the person to see any discrepancies in their position to encourage openness to change. Share new information on the topic in a non-challenging way.

Below are comments and questions you may hear, along with appropriate responses that acknowledge the other person's position, yet provide new information to encourage change.

1. "I was spanked and turned out fine."

- Not all children who are spanked will develop health and behavior problems later in life. Corporal punishment or spanking is a risk factor. This means that children who are physically punished (spanking included) have a greater risk for developing mental illness, substance dependence, aggressive behavior and antisocial behaviors (e.g. bullying).

Using cigarette smoking as an example can help explain risk factor. Not everyone who smokes will develop lung cancer; however, smoking does increase a person's risk for many health problems. Professionals advise against smoking because of the likelihood for problems later in life.

Infant sleep is a good example of how research informs us of parental practices that may cause more harm than good. In past practice, health professionals advised parents to put sleeping infants on their stomachs. However, research indicated this practice led to greater risk for sudden infant death syndrome. Therefore, professionals advised parents to change their practice for infant sleep. When parents learned about the risk of harm to their child, they changed their actions.

Just as research supports the connection between tummy sleeping and a higher risk for infant death, research supports the connection between corporal punishment and the increased risk for health problems. Health professionals encourage parents to learn and use safe and healthy discipline strategies that do not involve hitting.

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2. “Spanking works.”

- Spanking may seem to stop the problem behavior in the moment but it does not have a long-term influence on learning or building skills. Spanking does not teach children to self-manage strong emotions or change behaviors. Discipline works when a child learns a positive behavior from it.

3. “If I can’t spank, then what can I do?”

- Effective discipline is built upon a safe, secure and supportive parent-child relationship and focuses on teaching good behaviors. There are many effective alternative discipline strategies that promote learning and healthy child development. Examples include encouragement of positive behaviors through modeling, teaching, praising and providing opportunities for the child to practice skills.
- An effective discipline strategy would best-fit the situation, age and development level of the child.
- Misbehaviors can be effectively managed through clear rules, planned ignoring of negative attention-seeking behavior, logical and natural consequences, delay of privileges or time out. View challenging behaviors as learning opportunities.
- Discipline strategies, that do not involve hitting, have demonstrated effectiveness for building child skills in empathy, emotional regulation and problem solving.

4. “Is spanking child abuse?”

- Most parents do not intend to abuse a child; however, many cases of child abuse begin with the parent’s misinformed attempt to discipline or punish the child.
- Spanking varies in frequency, intensity, level of emotional control when it is used, and whether the parent combines it with other strategies. There is no “safe” way to spank because people will have different definitions of how hard to spank, when to spank and how a spanking should be done.

5. “What is your opinion on religious groups who support spanking?”

- We work with parents of all different religious groups to increase their understanding of mental, emotional and social health risks connected to spanking.
- Some religious groups attempt to support their position of spanking a child through biblical verses. Refer to this helpful resource: *From Sticks to Flowers: Guidelines for Child Protection Professional Working with Parents Using Scripture to Justify Corporal Punishment* by Victor Vieth, founder and senior director, Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center.

6. “I have tried other discipline methods and they don’t work.”

- The use of spanking is often a reactive response based out of parental frustration or anger. Instead, encourage parents to use proactive discipline strategies. Proactive discipline promotes positive child development, skill building and learning. Parents should try to intervene early, remain calm, and use a variety of discipline strategies to teach appropriate behavior and effective emotion regulation.
- A child’s age or development level will influence the child’s ability to learn, practice and master various behavioral skills. Discipline strategies should appropriately match the child’s ability to learn. (e.g. Infants do not understand the difference between good and bad behavior and therefore should not be punished. A warm parental response to an infant’s cry will meet the infant’s basic needs and promote healthy child development.)

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7. “Difficult children need spanking.”

- Spanking is still a socially accepted parental practice. The belief is that spanking will improve difficult behavior but research has shown that spanking is actually more likely to increase aggressive and antisocial behaviors in children. In fact, a recent meta-analysis that reviewed more than 75 studies, over 50 years, from 13 different countries did not find a single study that showed a link between spanking and better behavior (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).
- Clear ground rules and appropriate expectations can help to decrease difficult behaviors. Focus on teaching the positive behavior and use discipline strategies that do not include hitting to effectively respond to difficult behaviors.

8. “Respect comes through corporal punishment.”

- Hitting a child will not build respect; instead, hitting increases the likelihood for more challenges in the parent-child relationship.
- We do not tolerate adults hitting other adults, children hitting other children, or children hitting adults. The practice of adults hitting children teaches children that hitting is an okay way to handle problems. Hitting to resolve conflict does not demonstrate respect for others. Simons & Wurtele (2010) found that children who experience hitting as a form of punishment were more likely to promote hitting as a strategy to resolve conflict with a peer. Interestingly, 100 percent of the children in the study who did not experience physical punishment wanted to use pro-social skills to resolve the conflict.
- Adult modeling of behaviors will greatly influence the behaviors of children. Children learn by watching and imitating adults.

9. “Should parents be fined or jailed for spanking their kids?”

- The goal is to increase parental knowledge and awareness of health risks connected to the use of corporal punishment on children.

10. “Is hitting the child the same as ‘spanking’ or giving them a ‘swat on the butt’?”

- Hitting is a more accurate term. We should call it what it is and continue a healthy discussion on discipline methods that promote long-term learning and healthy childhood development.

11. “What if child runs into the street or sticks a finger in a light socket? These natural consequences are dangerous and life-threatening.”

- Of course, natural consequences are not appropriate when a child’s life or safety is threatened. Appropriate teaching and prevention methods need to be considered. (e.g. Parents should cover outlets and not allow their child to play near a street until the child is of the appropriate development level to understand the risks.)

For more information, visit ThisIsANoHitZone.org.