

A good spanking

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A recent study by a Michigan psychology professor concluded that "young children spanked by their parents may perform better at school later and grow up to be happier." Spanked? Happier? Received wisdom deems any physical punishment of children anathema, so predictable umbrage was taken by institutional stakeholders. The Canadian Paediatric Society harrumphed that "research has proven" spanking leads to "bad physical behaviour."

Proven? Nonsense. Human beings are too complex for conventional methodology to isolate any single element of child-rearing as a predictor for future behaviour. It didn't work for rigid potty training and won't work for spanking. All such "research" should arouse deep skepticism and a suspicion of bias.

I recall for example a ludicrous "study" "proving" that the pain of circumcision resulted in anti-social aggression in later life. But a serendipitous control group of millions of unusually social, physically non-aggressive Jewish men belie this foolish proposition.

One might more plausibly claim circumcision is a "proven" predictor of a future medical degree or a vote for Barack Obama.

Common sense and life experience resist all such reductionism. No research vehicle can single out spanking alone as a determining factor amongst the myriad variables, such as the family's general stability; the consistency, moderation and frequency of the practice; or whether punishment is administered privately or publicly, to name but a few.

How does one even define "spanking"? What you may call abuse -- a swiftly ministered open-handed smack to the well-upholstered butt of a wilfully disobedient child, such as the spanking I gave my three-year-old daughter when she darted into the path of an oncoming car and nearly gave me a heart attack-- I may call a "lesson" (she certainly never forgot it!). What others might call a lesson -- a trip to the woodshed and a pants-down, welt-raising

beating with a rod or strap -- I would agree is brutality.

Culture further muddies the waters: I remember a survey decades ago of U.S. adults who had been spanked as children. Immigrants' children were revealed as less likely than native-born children to take corporal punishment, even regular beatings, seriously because, during their initiation into American culture at school, they felt increasingly psychologically detached from their parents' old-world traditions.

The sense of injustice is all. Children have no innate sense that a timeout is just, but a spanking unjust. Children do feel a sense of injustice that may cause future problems when they are subjected to physical punishments for trivial offenses other children aren't, or when the rules aren't made clear to them and punishment seems arbitrary, or when in fact

there are no rules and punishment is arbitrary. Or when they feel unloved, a feeling that can be conveyed with or without spankings.

My son attended a boys' school where caning was still permitted, a superannuated practice almost everywhere else (and soon to be retired there as well). Dreading the distinct possibility he might come in for such punishment, I asked him how he felt about the prospect, which on principle -- we knew about it when we chose the school -- we would not have challenged. After some reflection, he said he would accept it as his due without ill will, if he had knowingly transgressed rules for which caning was known to be the punishment.

Ka-ching! If administered consistently and democratically, even a punishment viewed as retrograde and abusive everywhere else seemed fair in this 12-year-old's world. Although he was a child who routinely pushed boundaries -- the very reason he had been enrolled in this highly structured, tough-love school -- he somehow managed to curb the behaviours that would have led to caning. At first out of fear, and soon from volition, he internalized the value of living within appropriate boundaries. I don't approve of caning as a punishment. Just sayin'...

My children do not spank their children. I don't consider them morally superior to me and my friends who did; they're a product of their times, as we were of ours. Our attitude may seem callous by contemporary standards; today's attitude seems hyper-sentimental by ours.

Earnest young parents in every generation understandably seek cultural approval, which is why I would not spank today either. And in our therapeutically attuned society, zero tolerance for the deliberate infliction of any pain at all -- even the psychic pain of being "offended" -- however salutary its effect, is today's liberal litmus test for cultural correctness.

No study will ever conclusively prove normative spanking's beneficial or deleterious effects one way or the other, so reflexive judgmentalism is unfair: Parents must sort it

out for themselves, and we should all just leave it at "different strokes" -- or not -- "for different folks."