

Physical discipline is harmful and ineffective

A new APA resolution cites evidence that physical punishment can cause lasting harm for children

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APA adopted a new policy about the ineffectiveness and dangers of physical discipline against children to raise awareness among parents, caregivers and mental health professionals.

[The Resolution on Physical Discipline of Children By Parents](#)

, adopted by APA's Council of Representatives in February, relies on strong and sophisticated longitudinal research that finds physical discipline does not improve behavior and can lead to emotional, behavioral and academic problems over time, even after race, gender and family socioeconomic status have been statistically controlled.

To start, the research finds that hitting children does not teach them about responsibility, conscience development and self-control. "Hitting children does not teach them right from wrong," says Elizabeth Gershoff, PhD, an expert on the effects of corporal punishment on children who provided research for the resolution. "Spanking gets their attention, but they have not internalized why they should do the right thing in the future. They may behave when the adult is there but do whatever they want at other times."

In addition, children learn from watching their parents. Parents who use physical discipline may be teaching their child to resolve conflicts with physical aggression. Researchers found that spanking can elevate a child's aggression levels as well as diminish the quality of the parent-child relationship. Other studies have documented that physical discipline can escalate into abuse. The purpose of this resolution is to promote effective forms of discipline for parents that don't contribute to antisocial behaviors, aggression and trust issues. "Children do not need pain to learn," says Gershoff, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, "We don't allow aggression among adults. It's a sad double standard that we don't give children the same protection against violence."

Better discipline models

Upward of 80 percent of mothers spank their children between kindergarten and third grade, according to a large [study](#) conducted by Gershoff (*Child Development*, May/June 2012).

Most parents raise children the way they were raised and have not been exposed to other models of discipline, says APA President Rosie Phillips Davis, PhD. "I don't think most people know how to discipline without spanking. We don't teach people to do it differently; alternatives seem time-consuming," she says. The APA resolution presents effective alternatives that draw broadly on respectful communication, collaborative conflict resolution and parental modeling. Specifically, these approaches could include conveying anxiety about a dangerous action, taking away privileges or using praise to shape behavior. Sometimes, simply ignoring the behavior and not engaging in a fight is the best tactic, says Christina Rodriguez, PhD, an associate professor at The University of Alabama at Birmingham and chair of the APA Committee on Children, Youth and Families, who led the resolution effort. "Parents need to learn what they should or shouldn't respond to."

Parents of 3- to 5- year-olds are the most likely to spank. So, what about a preschooler who can't be reasoned with? Rodriguez advises parents to think strategically and plan ahead. If your child is prone to act out while you get groceries, bring snacks and toys to redirect the child or choose a time to shop when the child isn't sleepy, she suggests.

Calling a time-out for certain behaviors can be effective but it is often misused as a stand-alone strategy, Gershoff observes. "Looking at a wall for five minutes won't teach a child how to behave."

Rather, parents need to give children guidance about what to do differently, what is known as "time out from positive reinforcement (TOPR)." This technique makes time-out an opportunity to regroup and think about how to do better next time.

A [new study](#) in *American Psychologist* offers guidelines in using TOPR to maximize the development of the child's self-regulation skills while avoiding any weakening of the parent-child attachment bond from the time out (*American Psychologist*, Feb. 25, 2019).