

# Parenting Styles, Prevalence of Normative Spanking, and Reports of Children Sanctioned at School

(Unpublished research conducted in 2012)

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March 24, 2017

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## Abstract

*A poll was conducted by one-on-one conversations with one parent from each of 56 families having a child aged five to seven years old. The poll indicated that 46 (82%) had used or would use moderate spanking in child-rearing. Of the 10 that do not spank, 3 (5%) used parenting styles that included non-spanking consequences. Seven (13%) used truly "Positive Parenting" styles which included no consequences.*

*The research identified two children from the 56 family cohort that had been sanctioned for repeatedly hitting or bullying another child at school. Both came from one of the 7 positive parenting style environments. The probability that this is a random observation is 1.4% (42 of 3,080), or 1 in 73.33.*

*There is a statistically significant link between children raised with positive parenting styles and reports of the same children being sanctioned for hitting and bullying other children at school. This suggests that the spectrum of parenting styles that employ moderate spanking as a back-up to other methods produce on-balance, children less inclined to behave violently towards other children than the spectrum of parenting styles which exclude consequences.*

## Methods

### 1. Survey

During 2012, the researcher engaged in one-on-one conversations with one parent from each of 56 families. All of the parents and children, and the researcher, were known to each other prior to this research. Each parent was selected specifically for having at least one child in age range of five to seven years old at that time. The intent of this survey was to determine how prevalent the use of normative non-abusive spanking was.

During the conversation, the subject of discipline was introduced with the intent to determine if the parent *had used or would at any time use* a moderate open-handed spank of the seat; and if not, would the parent use other consequences. In essence, the discussion attempted to determine the predominant parenting style used (cf. *"Baumrind's Seven Parenting Styles"*<sup>1</sup>). The results were recorded in a log book. Once the research was complete and the bulk data compiled, the records were destroyed.

While this approach is slow and tedious, it appears to be the only accurate approach to determine actual usage rates. Telephone or internet polls reach larger audiences, but are notoriously problematic. Reasons that they tend to materially understate usage include:

1 Parents perceive differing definitions between terms like "corporal punishment", "physical discipline", "hitting" or "spanking". Depending on the terminology used, parents who actually spank moderately might tend to respond "No". For example, the majority of parents do not "hit" their children, yet they do spank.<sup>10</sup>

2 Further, people who are unsure of the laws or the true motives of the caller tend to deny using any consequences. *"Parents should rightly fear repercussions such as overzealous child-welfare workers persecuting them, usurping their parental authority and seizing their children, if they admit to committing [what they believe could be possible] criminal acts to a stranger on the phone."*<sup>2, 11</sup>

The parent cohort may not represent the broader population. This is due to the social contexts which provided the opportunity for such polling. The notable variations are as follows: the parents are primarily university-educated and upper-middle income. The sample is heavily weighted by parents whose occupations include educators, medical practitioners or other faculty at the local university.

### 2. Follow-Up

The researcher then determined which, if any, of the polled-parent's children, had been sanctioned at school for hitting or bullying other children.

## **Results**

### **Prevalence of Parental Spanking:**

Forty-six (or 82%) of the 56 parents polled indicated that they had, or would, use a moderate spank or spanking in child-rearing. The researcher did not inquire how frequently spanking is used, only whether at some point during child-rearing it was or would be used.

Ten of the 56 parents polled indicated they would not use or believe in any form of physical discipline. Within those 10 families:

Three (or 5%) did or would use other (undisclosed) consequences to adjust behavior; and seven (or 13%) used “Positive Parenting” approaches, as defined by their affirmations that they do not (knowingly or intentionally) use consequences in child-rearing.

During the conversations, there was no evidence that any parent used any abusive<sup>12</sup> parenting style or consequence.

### **Prevalence of Children being Sanctioned for Hitting or Bullying other children at School:**

The research identified two children from the entire group that had been sanctioned at school before the end of 2012 for repeatedly hitting or bullying another child. Both children were from the seven “Positive Parenting” environments, and each from a different family within that group.

The methodology provided a relatively small sample size. Yet, the result is significant. There are 3,080 combinations of randomly choosing 2 children from a set of 56 families. Yet, both children coming from the 7 positive parenting style families only provides 42 possible random combinations.

Therefore, the odds that the observation of the 2 violent children both come from 2 of the 7, within a set of 56 choices is only 1.4%, (42 of 3,080) being 1 in 73.33. So while the sample size is relatively small, there is a 98.6% probability that the result is statistically meaningful and not random.

## Discussion

Even within this small sample of 56 families, the 82% who confirm they have used or would use moderate spanking in child-rearing is consistent with other studies. For example, spanking prevalence was reported as: 85% in England (2004)<sup>3</sup>, 87% in France (2009)<sup>4</sup> and 86% in the U.S.A. (2013)<sup>5</sup>. In fact, even in Germany which had banned spanking in 2000, a 2012 poll showed *“four out of ten parents admitting to smacking their children on the bottom”*<sup>6</sup>.

An oft-cited opinion is that parents who spank are uneducated, low income, on social assistance, from minority groups or single mothers. This study undermines that claim, as the cohort studied clearly had none of these attributes.

There was a reason to specifically inquire about children’s behaviour at school in relation to the reported parenting styles they were reared with. The researcher polled Germans in 2012 to determine if the ban on parental spanking in 2000 had affected attitudes towards children. One particular response from a long-time educator of primary-aged children stated, *“in the last few years these children have become rude, undisciplined and violent, hitting each other and also myself... they have become uncontrollable and it’s time for me to leave teaching”*. That study was not intended to determine a causal link between parent’s inability to spank and the subsequently heightened ill-behaviour that the teacher experienced at school. However; it raised an important question that the researcher had wanted to explore further. The question being, *“Is there a link between children raised under parenting systems that either do or do not use moderate non-injurious spanking as a consequence and children’s violent behaviour at school?”*

This study provides one piece of statistical evidence that parenting styles which employ moderate spanking as a consequence are not causal of child violence (as measured by hitting or bullying other children at school) when measured against parenting styles that do not employ negative consequences in behaviour management.

This study is not ground-breaking research. There are other studies which suggest an increase in behavioural problems and violence by children from environments that disallow parenting styles employing non-injurious spanking, such as in Sweden<sup>7</sup>, Austria<sup>8</sup>, and New Zealand<sup>9</sup>.

To be clear, parenting is nuanced, and the constructive use of consequences is also nuanced. As each child is unique, it is quite possible that a parenting approach highly suited to meek and mild children may not be optimal for strong-willed and oppositionally defiant children.

On-balance, this study provides empirical evidence that the claims made to support prohibitions against parental spanking are far from settled, and suggest they are not in the best developmental interests of the child.

Sources:

- 1 Baumrind, D. (1989), Rearing competent children. In W. Damon (Ed.), *“Child Development Today and Tomorrow”*, (pp. 349-378) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 2 Hoff, H, (2014) *“Corporal Punishment: Is It Effective? An Empirical Study of School Punishment Records”*, Iron Gate Research, ISBN 149759748X, p.10 found here: <https://www.amazon.ca/Corporal-Punishment-Effective-Empirical-Records/dp/149759748X>
- 3 *“A Reasonable Approach to Discipline”*, Family Education Trust, Twickenham, UK, October 2004, p.3 citing British Market Research Bureau, Survey on smacking, July 2004
- 4 *Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children*, accessed 11 March 2014, <[www.endcorporalpunishment.org](http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org)>, country files: France, source cited as Bussmann, K. D. (2009), *“The Effect of Banning Corporal Punishment in Europe: A Five-Nation Comparison”*, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
- 5 Gray, Barbara Bronson, *“Spanking Batters Kids’ Mental Health: Study”*, Winnipeg Free Press, MB, 2 July 2012, accessed 3 July 2012,
- 6 4 *ibid*, country files: Germany, source cited as “Reported in DW.DE, 13 March 2012”
- 7 Robert E. Larzelere, Taren Swindle and Byron R. Johnson, *“Swedish Trends in Criminal Assaults against Minors since Banning Spanking, 1981-2010”*, International Journal of Criminology and Sociology, 2013, 2, 129-137. Citing that children raised after Sweden’s 1979 spanking ban were 519% more violent than the previous cohort raised with parental spanking. Found Here: <http://www.keep43.ca/app/download/7241856562/2013+Larzelere%2C+Swedish+trends+1981-2010.pdf>
- 8 Krug, Etienne G, et al, *World Report on Violence and Health*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002, p.30, showing that Austria had the highest school bullying rates of 13 year old school children of a 27-country study; NB: Austria banned spanking in 1989.
- 9 *“2016 Defying Human Nature, An Analysis of New Zealand’s 2007 Anti-Smacking Law”*, Johnson, Alan, “Striking a Better Balance: A State of the Nation Report from the Salvation Army”, The Salvation Army Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, New Zealand, February 2014, showing that in 2013, children diagnosed with emotional / behavioural problems increased 138% since the 2007 spanking ban. <http://www.keep43.ca/app/download/7243563856/2016+NZ+Defying-Human-Nature.pdf>

- 10 Definitions: Terms such as: Hitting, Striking, Beating and Assault infer the use of excessive force, in demeanor of anger and rage, with the intent to cause harm and damage. "Spanking" is a very specific procedure, which uses moderate non-injurious force, with the demeanor and intent of modifying behaviour and improving the child. The former and latter are opposite in *modus operandi*, intent and result. For years now, professional methodologists have decried the problems in child-discipline research which produce slanted science. One of the many flaws is the intentional conflating of these two opposites. Cite: Larzelere, R., Trumbull, D., "Research on Disciplinary Spanking is Misleading", January 2017, American College of Pediatricians, Found Here: <http://www.acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/parenting-issues/corporal-punishment-a-scientific-review-of-its-use-in-discipline/research-on-disciplinary-spanking-is-misleading>
- 11 Hoff, H., "*Parental Spanking Bans and Societal Disinterest in Children: How they Relate by Fertility Rate Analysis*" Iron Gate Research. 2015, ISBN 1517714788, Preface p.10, citing, "*In the year 2000, Germany imposed a spanking ban on parents. In 2012, the researcher interviewed Germans to assess what their attitudes were in this regard. It became apparent that these bans had indeed inculcated some level of resentment and defensiveness in prospective parents.*" Responses included: "*they [children] are no longer manageable and too much bother.*" "*you can barely say 'No' to a child without someone running to the courts and making a complaint that you hurt their feelings*" "*the risks of having children now outweighs the benefits so it is best avoided*" and from a long-time educator of primary-aged children, "*in the last few years these children have become rude, undisciplined and violent, hitting each other and also myself... they have become uncontrollable and it's time for me to leave teaching*". Whereby the researcher concluded, "*...it appears that these [spanking] bans do instill a certain level of repulsion towards children, particularly where it is perceived that their behaviours are no longer adequately managed*" and that, "*There appears to be a material element of deterrent effect on those considering having children.*" Found here: <https://www.amazon.com/Parental-Spanking-Societal-Disinterest-Children/dp/1517714788>
- 12 Definition of "Abusive": defined by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 37* which states: "*No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.*", or any physical, psychological, emotional or verbal treatment which would indicate to a person of good sense that the child was in need of outside protection or intervention from such treatment.