



## We Have Hit Bottom by Using Corporal Punishment in the Schools

A Review of

*Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: Legal Precedents, Current Practices, and Future Policy*

by Elizabeth T. Gershoff, Kelly M. Purtell, and Igor Holas

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Reviewed by

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Corporal punishment (CP) is “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain so as to punish or correct their behavior” (p. 2). Immediate immersion in the stark, appalling, and lamentable facts and findings is useful before point of departure for examining the contribution of *Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: Legal Precedents, Current Practices, and Future Policy*. To that end, we learn that:

- In a given year (data from 2009–2010), approximately 220,000 children are subjected to CP at school; approximately 10,000 to 20,000 students a year require medical attention.
- CP is not restricted for fighting and other aggressive student behavior or used as a last resort in a sequence of other disciplinary efforts. Rather, it is equally applied for nonviolent and more minor behaviors (e.g., being disruptive, being late for class, running in the halls, going to the bathroom without permission, and mispronouncing words).
- Most school CP involves hitting a child or adolescent (from preschool through high school) on the behind with a wooden paddle (e.g., usually 2 ft. long × 4 in. wide).
- Other means of CP are used as well, such as hitting with objects other than “just” paddles (e.g., yard sticks, pipes) and choking, hair pulling, and dragging. These means constitute child abuse in most states if carried out by a parent.
- Hitting youths is legal in public schools in 19 states in the United States and in private schools in 48 states.

- Uses of CP are discriminatory, with disproportionate application to boys, African American children, and children with disabilities. The discriminatory applications of CP violate existing federal laws.
- States characterized by more children living in poverty, more single-parent families, and a higher proportion of adults without a high school degree are more likely to use CP in the schools.
- Contrary to common beliefs, hitting children does not lead to decreased performance of the punished behaviors, and banning CP does not lead to an increase of those behaviors or in aggression and delinquency more generally.
- Although the public generally is in favor of CP (e.g., at home), only a minority supports CP in the schools.

These harsh facts about harsh punishment convey the focus of the book. Let us go beyond the findings and consider the book in greater depth. The book is part of a series referred to as Springer Briefs in Psychology (which I was happy to learn is not a new line of garments). The model for the series is to provide concise volumes (50 to 125 pages) on a given topic. This book is part of a subseries, *Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice*, edited by Barbara H. Fiese. This book is unique in packing a rather amazing amount of material in a very short space. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, the lead author, is deservedly recognized as the preeminent scholar on the topic of CP. That reputation has been earned by her remarkable and influential work, reviews, and position statements on CP.

## Contents

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The book begins with a brief executive summary of key findings followed by nine chapters:

1. Introduction
2. Prevalence of and Attitudes About School Corporal Punishment in the U.S.
3. Gender, Race, and Disability Disparities in Who Is Subject to School Corporal Punishment
4. School Corporal Punishment Effects on Children
5. Policy Analysis: School Corporal Punishment Bans and Juvenile Crime
6. The Legal Basis for School Corporal Punishment
7. Legal and Public Policy Strategies to Reduce or Ban School Corporal Punishment
8. Education and Advocacy Efforts to Reduce School Corporal Punishment
9. Conclusion

The content is covered in scholarly detail with multiple citations to pertinent literatures. In addition, original research is presented by culling information from available resources, analyzing data differently than in those reports, and presenting and discussing the results. The chapters build logically from the scope of the problem to factors that are likely to sustain it, hopeful opportunities for remedies, and what needs to be done.

The format of the book is distinct, with multiple headings in each chapter, often with brief material, a paragraph or two, in that section. The headings are very clear as to what is to be presented. Indeed, if the opening executive summary were read along with the headings of the book, the reader would know the key points readily, minus the careful documentation and support. Tables and figures, some of which are in color, break up the narrative nicely and are sprinkled lightly throughout.

The audience for the book is the professional who is familiar with research findings and methods. Terms that are not forbidding to researchers (e.g., beta weights, odds ratios,  $z$  and  $t$  tests, lagged models, confidence intervals) are assumed to be familiar and provided without explanation. That feature and the appropriate and frequent citations to the literature convey the book is intended for a professional and academic audience. While that is valuable in its own right, it is clear that all of the messages in this book need to go to anyone involved in education (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators) or the care, protection, and health of children (e.g., policy makers and legislators).

## **Additional Material to Have Considered**

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The series is designed to be brief, and what the authors integrated in this book is rather impressive. Two areas deserve comment that I consider important additions. First, more might have been said about effective interventions, although the authors noted they could not go into detail. The intervention side is heavily weighted toward law, policy, and legislation. On the "treatment side," applied behavior analysis (e.g., use of antecedents, behaviors, and consequences; functional assessment) has decades of effective intervention in the schools on a small and large scale (Kazdin, 2013). Two programs briefly mentioned in the book (School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports and Social and Emotional Learning) are significant in showing classroom improvements delivered on a large scale (multiple states, multiple schools). Other work is available giving even more options to replace CP. For example, the Good Behavior Game is a means of managing classroom behavior. Implementation in the first and second grades leads to short-term improvements in child behavior and to long-term improvements and changes as well (e.g., reductions in criminal behavior, alcohol abuse, cigarette smoking) in young adulthood (ages 19–21; e.g., Kellam, Reid, & Balster, 2008). These and related interventions are not routinely trained, and hence our best tools are not provided to discipline children. I thought there might be value in giving greater attention to options for teachers that are readily available and have a strong evidence base.

Second, more attention might have been given to psychological factors that sustain the use of CP. Emphasis on context, law, and policy were all well placed, but the book was silent on psychological findings (e.g., neuroscience, cognitive psychology, learning) related to the neurobiology of aggressive behavior and action of aggressive acts on reward centers, the negativity bias in scanning behavior and events in the world, and the immediate negative reinforcement of administering punishment for the individual who punishes child behavior

(referred to as the punishment trap). These are some of the key influences that sustain acts of aggression in the context of discipline (and other contexts, too). Adding more on these direct influences on the person who delivers CP would fill out the already excellent coverage of contextual, social, and legal factors that sustain CP but also elaborate on what we must contend with as we try to effect change.

## Overall Evaluation

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What do we know about CP in the schools and its many facets? Arguably, this book is the best resource to answer that. This is not a book that merely reviews a literature in a scholarly fashion, although it certainly is that. The topic is where science, public life, culture, tradition, religion, law, morality, and international policy converge and often conflict (e.g., beliefs in the effectiveness and benefits of CP clash with the findings of ineffectiveness and deleterious effects).

Scientific findings that are immediately relevant to public life raise a clear challenge that consists of moving from research to advocacy to change public behavior, social practices, and policy. Samples from the endless list include the following: getting people to eat vegetables, exercise, stop smoking, drink a little less alcohol, eat a little dark chocolate, wear seat belts, and not text while driving are all areas where I believe quite sufficient empirical research is available to guide individual and group behavior and policy. Yes, any of us writing research papers must include the de rigueur "more research is needed" paragraph. Even so, it still may be wise to make decisions on the best available research.

The move from scientific findings to advocacy has shoals that must be negotiated carefully. The mission of science is to describe, explain, and point out the consequences of different courses of action and inaction. Moving into advocacy and saying "should" to the public goes beyond what science is intended to accomplish and what scientists are uniquely trained to do. Public adoption of practices and policies are determined by many factors, one of which we hope is good science. The challenge for science was nicely framed by William Press, a computer scientist, computational biologist, and past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the world's largest scientific society. Press (2015) argued that we ought to present our data-based conclusions and our value-based judgments and recommendations. Each perspective is valuable, but we ought to be careful in keeping the distinction clear. Connecting that to the present book is easy because of the relevance of CP to everyday life. If we want to eliminate the use of CP and the violence and antisocial behavior that CP often begets, perhaps we cannot dance around and stay out of the fray. To that end, I greatly applaud the closing lines of the book with the clarity and directness that follows from the preceding content. The authors state, "CP is ineffective, unnecessary, and harmful to children. There should be no place for it in American education" (p. 105). Perhaps scientific findings coupled with strong recommendations can mobilize more allies and constituents in such a way as to actually reduce the unnecessary harm and pain to which schoolchildren are subjected.

## References

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