

# Chapter 26 – Why Do We Hurt Our Children?

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### Why Do We Hurt Our Children?

*by James Kimmell*

As a psychologist who specialized in working with emotionally disturbed children, and as a person who has a special fondness for children, it is extremely troublesome to me that punishment, both physical and otherwise, is an intrinsic part of child rearing in the United States. None of my three children, now adults, were ever punished. Just as people who state, “I was spanked and punished and I turned out OK,” my children are able to say, “I was never spanked or punished and I turned out OK.” And based on the kind of people they are as adults, I would agree that, not only did they turn out OK, but they are much more caring of others, including their children, than most of their contemporaries. They do not, of course, punish their children.

However, I do not wish to prove through my children or my grand-children that punishment is totally unnecessary in order to grow up to be a socially appropriate and caring person. We already know this from studies of cultures where children are never punished. I hope to show, instead, that punishing children is a malevolent act that is harmful to children and, ultimately, to the community and society in which it takes place. The punishment of one human being by another is behavior in which the punisher has, or believes he has, the right to hurt and violate a person he perceives as his social inferior. Punishing another individual of one’s species is a human cultural invention. It is not found in all cultures nor in the animal world. Its utilization as a child-rearing method seems to go hand in hand with the development of civilization.

A person hurting another as a result of a temporary loss of emotional control is not punishment. Such behavior is a different form of violence. Punishment is a deliberate, controlled act with a conscious purpose. It is, of course, a terrible, troublesome, and dangerous fact that, in our society, parental loss of control, accompanied by physical and verbal abuse of children, is tolerated. However, such behavior is not the subject of this paper. Our society, although it may not do much to prevent it, does not openly condone child abuse. But it does openly condone and sanction punishing children, physically and otherwise. What bothers me so much about punishing children is that it is a conscious effort to hurt them physically and/or emotionally. I find it hard to understand, even when it is explained as a way of teaching them proper behavior, why someone would intentionally

choose to hurt the life they contributed to creating (or chose to care for through adoption.) I also find it incredible that parents, and many authorities in the areas of mental and physical health, child development, and human morality, cannot see that by hurting children, we are teaching them that it is moral and right to hurt other human beings.

## **The Origins Of Punishment**

It is likely that punishment initially developed in our species as a method to control and direct the behavior of animals by hurting them. It later was applied by humans to other humans to control individual behavior and thinking. The fact that punishment can modify behavior is well-founded. Research studies on rats, as well as other animals, have clearly indicated that by inflicting pain on them, we can control to a great extent what they do or don't do (Bermant)\*□, a fact known by farmers and animal trainers for thousands of years. Human thinking can also be altered by punishment and has been utilized throughout civilization by monarchs, dictators, slave owners, authoritarian states, and religious institutions to control deviant and non-conforming individuals.

We do not know when punishment first became a method used to direct children's development. I have never read about a hunter-gatherer society that punishes their children as part of child care. In ancient civilizations, and throughout the history of civilization, punishing children was a common practice (deMause), and the practice continues today in much of the civilized world. Punishment is and has been a commonly accepted part of American child-rearing (deMause, Beekman). It is perceived as a legitimate and appropriate form of discipline. Its legitimacy in human relationships has few parallels in American life, especially since the abolition of slavery. Other than children, only convicted criminals are legally allowed to be punished. But children do not even have the rights of criminals, as they are allowed to be punished without a trial. The closest parallel to punishing children would be the punitive ways in which we domesticate and train young animals so that they will serve, submit to, and entertain us. When we punish our children, we serve to perpetuate the Western civilization belief that children are, like animals, inferior beings who need to be tamed, trained, and controlled.

## **Punishment and Distrust**

Obviously, the decision, felt necessity, or compulsion to punish another person reflects a lack of trust in that person, whether it be in the relationship of governments to citizens, tyrants to subjects, slave owners to slaves, wardens to prisoners, teachers to students, or parents to children. The advocates of punishing children (which include some past and present "experts" on child development) have a condescending and ugly view of children which is embedded in an even uglier view of the human species. Humans are not, in their eyes, a naturally caring and social species, but a species in which the individual is born anti-social and governed solely by self concern and self-interest. They further believe that

children resist socialization, so it must be imposed on them by adults.

There is no recognition, in this perception of the human individual as selfish, alienated, and basically separate from all others, to the fact that sociability, socialization, and the ability to trust develop naturally through appropriate nurturing in childhood. The quality of basic trust, as originally formulated by the psychologist Eric Erikson, is the foundation for a healthy personality (Evans). Its meaning to Erikson and his followers was that during the first year of life, a baby learns that those who care for him can be trusted to satisfy his basic needs. From this secure base the infant learns to trust himself and the world. I prefer to describe basic trust as the experience of a baby or young child that there is a person there for him, who affirms his life and well-being by providing the nurturing relationship that he genetically and biologically evolved to have after birth. Without such an experience during the first stage of life, an infant does not develop the full trust in others that is essential for healthy human emotional and social development.

The need for an infant to develop basic trust in those who care for him has become widely accepted by virtually all health-care specialists. It is not always expressed in such terms, nor is it always achieved, but we all seem to know that babies and children need “love”. Much less emphasis has been given to the need for parents to develop basic trust in their children. They may love them, but do they trust them? In fact, many American authorities on infant and child care have sent the message that children, including infants, cannot be trusted. Babies and young children are frequently portrayed as being manipulative and wanting to make their parents’ life miserable, as if their need and desire to be with their parents, and to be nurtured by them, is not genuine (Spock, Turtle).

I do not believe that genuine trust can develop in a relationship unless both parties have trust in each other. *In the parent-child relationship, the child learns to trust his parents when his need for nurturing is regularly met.* But this development of trust can only occur if the parent’s response to the child is based on the belief that the child’s expression of his need for nurturing is genuine, that the child is not just trying to “get his own way”; and is not out to make the parent’s life difficult. Misery, unhappiness, and a struggle for power often do become a part of the parent-child interaction, especially in a society such as our own which does not trust and does not validate the nurturing requirements of children. If the relationship of parent and child does become a continual struggle, it is not because the child’s motivation is to punish the parent, but because his need for nurturing is not being met. It is also true that a child, as he matures, may begin to behave in ways to punish his parents, but this can only occur if his parents have regularly punished him.

The use of punishment by parents is a clear indication that there has been an insufficient development of trust between parent and child in the early formative years of the child’s development. Most American parents punish their children. Most also begin punishing them, and using the threat of punishment, at a very early age (usually in infancy). Children

grow up believing that the punishment they received was deserved, and that they were harmful, bad, and not trustworthy. Many, as adults, who lack a foundation of parental trust, do not trust, or even like, themselves. They perceive their needs, especially their need for nurturing, caring, kindness, love, and intimacy, as “bad”, selfish, indulgent, harmful, and a burden put on others. Some spend their entire lifetime feeling guilty towards their parents. Often, they begin in adolescence to self-destruct, punishing themselves for burdening their parents, for having been born, for being alive.

## **The Most Common Methods Of Punishing Children**

Corporal punishment in the form of spanking (even in infancy) is the most common way children are punished in America. Slapping, hitting and beating with the hand or straps and other instruments closely follow. NBC News has reported that about 90 percent of U.S. parents spank their children. In addition, a 1992 survey reported that 59 percent of pediatricians support the practice (“When Spankings Are Abuse”). It is important to recognize that in our society most parents and many of our infant and child care authorities, do not classify spanking as hitting or physical punishment. By a magnificent denial of reality, it is often described as a “love tap” or “pat” or “harmless swat” or “loving reminder”. Since spanking has traditionally been administered in the United States to almost all children for generations, it is considered a natural part of growing up, the same as feeding.

Other more bizarre methods of corporal punishment, such as burning children with fire and other forms of heat, having them kneel on hard objects, or forcing them to stand for many hours, are less common than they once were, but they are still practiced today. We do not know the current extent of their use, nor do we know the current extent of other kinds of physical torture. Throughout civilization, until fairly recently, there have been various kinds of commercial items produced to punish children; including whips, the notorious cat of nine tails, cages, and various shackling devices (Beekman). Since these products are no longer openly advertised and sold, one would expect, or at least hope, that they are not used any more to punish children.

While many countries now outlaw the physical punishment of children, only Austria and the Scandinavian countries completely ban hitting them. However, in the United States, corporal punishment of children by parents is legal and widely practiced. It is also legal in the educational system, despite the fact that it is prohibited in the schools of almost all other industrialized nations. The US, Canada and one state in Australia still continue the practice. Thirty-one of the states in the U.S. have banned corporal punishment in their schools. The twenty three others continue to allow teachers to hit and paddle their students when they deem it necessary (Corporal Punishment Fact Sheet). As a nation, we have been slow to understand the harmful effects that hitting has on our children, and we continue to defend our right to continue to hit them. We do not seem to be concerned that

spanking and physically punishing our children creates a new generation who will in turn, continue to physically hurt their children. Based on our belief in the value of corporal punishment we are, in fact, likely to encourage our children to use it on our grandchildren.

It is frightening that many parents, educators, and others who are involved in child care today act out on children the cruel physical imposition that was inflicted on them by their parents and other care-givers while they were growing up. But even more frightening to me than the passage of physical cruelty to children through generations, is the passage of the belief that punishing children is a necessary part of raising them. Even parents and child-care experts who do not believe in corporal punishment advocate other kinds of punishment such as “time-out” and “logical consequences”. (Salk, “When Spankings Are Abuse”). Although many of these methods, which are designed to get children to behave, are viewed as appropriate ways to discipline children, they are, in reality, punishments, the purpose of which is to get children to obey their parents’ rules and regulations by imposing on them parental power and authority. The following are some of the ways, other than physical punishment, that are frequently used by parents to punish their children. These were not originally or specifically created as tools to help parents to get their children to behave properly. In general, these methods have been borrowed from the traditional methods used to punish adults who had committed crimes or violated laws, rules, customs, or conventional ways of behaving.

### **Isolation and Confinement**

Isolation and confinement usually go together. A child is sent to his room, or made to stand or sit in a corner and usually not permitted to be with, or relate to others. The currently popular “time-out” is, of course, confinement, and also isolation, if the child must be alone during the “time-out” period. Less openly discussed forms of this type of punishment are the practices of tying up or chaining children, locking them in rooms, closets, cars, sheds or other areas of confinement. In general, isolation and confinement are for a brief time. However, it is not uncommon for the time period to extend into hours, and although much less common, can extend sometimes to days, weeks, and even months. Basically, isolation and confinement give children the message that they are inferior and unfit to be with other humans. Many children, if they are frequently punished in this manner will come to believe that they are different, “crazy” and unfit when compared to other children who do not seem to require or receive this type of banishment from society. Often, as they mature, these children act in accordance with what they have been made to believe about themselves.

### **Deprivation**

Another method by which we attempt to teach children to behave is to deprive them of things. Most children are no longer sent to bed without supper. They are, however, denied

privileges. Frequent items that are denied include dessert, sweets, toys, allowance or spending money, TV, music, movies, the car, the telephone, friends, or whatever the child likes and is important to him. The length of time of the specific deprivation varies greatly, depending upon, among other things, the particular family, the nature of the misbehavior, and the age of the child. But all forms of deprivation – regardless of their length – teach children that their parents have the power to make their lives miserable by taking away what has meaning to them. Who would trust, or even like, someone with such power?

## **Grounding**

Grounding is similar to and overlaps the punishments of deprivation and confinement, but it is much worse. Here the focus is more on prohibiting activity away from the home, rather than on denying that which is external and material. It is being confined to the house rather than confined to a room in the house. The child is not allowed to go and to do. He is “grounded”, like a plane or “docked,” like a ship, made to be immobile, temporarily “out of commission”. He has lost, for a time, his freedom to move about, his freedom to be fully alive and to grow. The punishment of grounding is, ironically, a major way to teach children to be defiant and disobedient towards their parents, because it usually attacks life and growth in relation to one’s peers. One can tolerate, for a time, starvation and imprisonment. It is more difficult to lose one’s freedom to act and to be, especially for children.

## **Withdrawal of Affection**

Highly recommended, as a means to control children’s behavior, even by supposed liberal and progressive child care experts (Spock, Salk), is the punishment known as withdrawal of affection. Why it is necessary for a parent to consciously do this, is puzzling to me because withdrawal of affection seems to occur automatically (at least temporarily), to most people when someone (including one’s child) does something we strongly dislike or which hurts us. Momentary loss of affectionate or tender feelings toward another is a natural part of human relationships and serves to communicate to a significant other what we, as an individual, personally like or dislike. Humans are able to enhance this automatic non-verbal communication with language. However, even without language, the message gets across. Babies communicate their likes and dislikes quite effectively, without a fully-developed language, all the time – that is, if they have someone who is attentively listening and watching.

The communication of both positive and negative feelings is an important way that our species learns to live with, accommodate to, and collaborate with one another. It is an essential part of the human nurturing process. Mother and child are continually accommodating to each other: finding mutually comfortable nursing and carrying positions, dealing with biting of the breast as the child grows teeth, accommodation to the child’s



increasing development and changing capabilities, the birth of a sibling, and, from the moment of birth, the parents' cultural values and priorities.

Affectionate feelings, and the absence of such feelings, are spontaneous reactions in human relationships. When affection is consciously withdrawn as a means to control another, we are dealing with a different kind of human interaction than the integrative one described in the previous paragraph. Exploiting another person's emotional vulnerability is not an integrative act but rather an act which ultimately alienates the other person. It is a dishonest use of love. It is fake love. The conscious withdrawal of affection by a parent in order to get the child to behave in the manner the parent desires is simply a way of exploiting the child's need for affection from the parent. *It is treating caring and love as commodities which can be given or taken away whenever the parent wishes.* Affection becomes a power tool, a bribe, rather than an emotion. When withdrawal of affection and love is consciously and regularly used as a way to punish children, their human capacity to love, cherish, and trust another person, becomes tarnished. The child's critical need for parental love, security, and protection has been abused.

### **Some Other Ways Frequently Used To Punish Children**

There are, of course, other ways that children have been, and continue to be, punished than the ones I have already detailed. We no longer punish adults by public whipping or by exposing them to public scorn by placing them in a pillory or stock or ducking stool. But children are still punished, if not by such extreme measures, then by intentionally embarrassing and humiliating them. It is considered proper in rearing children to make them feel ashamed about their behavior, and to humiliate and disgrace them in front of others. Dunce caps, as well as wearing and carrying signs about one's bad behavior, are still used by parents, teachers and school officials, although not as much as they were in the early part of this century. Ridicule and verbal abuse, both in the home and in public, are common methods used by parents and other authoritarians to make children feel badly about themselves and their behavior.

Another common way of punishing children is to frighten them. They are told about, and threatened with, images of bogeymen, monsters, God, the devil, animals, hell, or whatever humans can invent, to terrorize children in order to get them to behave. This form of mental torture is preferred by many parents because it allows the parent to let someone else do the "dirty work". It is not the parent who will harm the child but somebody, or something, else. This form of punishment makes children a little "crazy", and when used extensively, very "crazy".

One other commonly used punishment, which on the surface appears to be benign, is the assignment of chores or additional chores as punishment for "bad" behavior. Of course, this kind of punishment is not so benign if the chores are extremely strenuous or so

prolonged that they can be physically harmful to the child. In addition, if the chores hinder the child greatly from other more desirable activities, the child is then receiving “double” punishment, which is not only unfair, but doubly painful. The assignment of chores as punishment can lead children to resent and hate the chores that need to be accepted as a natural part of learning, working, and caring for oneself and others. Chore-punishment may not hurt a child as much as other punishments, but, as do all punishments, it teaches children that it is all right to impose your will on another if you believe your cause is just.

## **Punishment And Parent-Child Alienation**

It is strange to me that parents who punish their child do not seem to recognize that, not only are they harming the child, but they are also harming their relationship with the child. But perhaps they do recognize this fact, and that is why the statement by parents, “This hurts me more than it does you,” has long been a part of the child punishment ritual. Intentionally hurting another person leads the injured person to be afraid of, and distrustful of, the person who has hurt them, especially if the hurting person indicates that they have the right to hurt the victim, and that they will continue to hurt the victim, whenever they deem it necessary.

Punishment of children alienates them from their parents and increases children’s distrust of those who, biologically, are supposed to provide them with the security of feeling and knowing that they are not separate in the world. Children, because they are dependent on their parents for so many essential things, usually have little choice but to accept the reality that punishment and hurt are part of their relationship with their parents. However, as they get older, children of punitive parents are more likely, as compared with children who are not punished, to lie to, to not confide in, and to conceal their behaviors from their parents. This is not part of the normal growth pattern of becoming a person who is less dependent on their parents, but rather a reflection of the fact that these children do not trust their parents to be understanding, empathic, or to treat them kindly. The punishment these children received when they were younger has taught them that when they are involved in problematic behavior, their personal integrity and rights as a person will be ignored, violated and not respected by their parents. *They have received the true message of punishment, which is to banish behavior which appears to be negative, rather than to try to understand it.*

## **Does Punishing Children Work?**

Does punishing children work? It definitely helps parents to believe that they are in control of their child. They are able to relax for a while until the next misdeed. Does punishment change children’s behavior? Yes, but only for a brief time. Usually children will continue to do the same things they were punished for, if they think they can get away with it.



One of the troubles with punishment as a way to teach children proper social behavior, aside from the infliction of pain, is that it makes children feel weak, impotent and incapable. Punishment teaches children to look to external authority to decide for them how they should behave, rather than looking to themselves. They do not learn how, in collaboration with others, to make choices; they do not learn how to decide what is good for them and for those who are important to them. What they learn instead is to submit to authority and power, to obey. By being punished and treated as inferior beings, they become inferior beings – they do not develop the power of the human individual to love and trust. Children who are regularly punished learn to fear their parents. They learn the behaviors that their parents like and don't like and also, how to hide these behaviors from their parents. *They develop "proper" behavior out of fear, not choice.*

Some children openly defy their punitive parents. These children usually end up getting into worse trouble with their parents, and with other authorities as they mature. Most children, however, go underground. In order to protect themselves from parental power they develop a "good", submissive-to-authority, social pose to hide their secret misbehaviors and improper thoughts and feelings. Their social behavior is not genuine because it has little to do with who they really are. Once out of the realm of authoritarian control, they adopt new ways and new codes consistent with the values and priorities of their peers. They go in any direction the wind blows to avoid disapproval and to gain approval. The lack of respect their parents had for them has prevented them from developing respect for themselves.

## **Why We Hurt Our Children**

The question that must be asked is why we are, and have been, so willing to hurt our children in order to get them to behave – to treat them as criminals, slaves and animals. Of course, we are, in part, following the traditional ways of treating children for centuries of civilization. But there is more to it than just tradition. We have in the past century learned a great deal more than we knew before about children's emotional and social development and their mental health. This information is not kept secret from the public. Most of us even seem to recognize and accept that what happens to children in their early years has a great deal to do with the kind of persons they become. Yet, we continue to punish them. Do we not see the harm we do? Why do we not stop consciously hurting our children?

For some parents, whose own punishment as children was accompanied by rage, hatred, and sadism, punishing their own children is an opportunity for them to legally inflict pain on another human being – a chance to get back at someone for the pain that they suffered. But for most parents, it is a matter of controlling behavior which they were made to control in their own childhood. It is a matter of ignorance, of passing on malevolent and inappropriate behavior toward children which they learned to accept as appropriate in their own childhoods. They are acting from an attitude that says it is just and right to hurt

children in order to achieve certain ends. They will defend their belief that their own parents were right to punish them, that they are right to punish their children, and that their children will be right to punish their children. "After all," so many parents say, "how else can you get them to behave?" And many, even when they are told "how", still punish their children. On a deeper psychological and social level, parental punishers of their children do so because their children make them anxious by confronting them with behaviors and feelings which the parents themselves have learned to hide, suppress, repress, and disown. They must condition their children as they were conditioned.

Children threaten our identity, security, and reality. We harm them in order to stop our perceived threat that their behavior will harm us. It is a myth that we punish children for their own good. We punish children so that we will be secure. Our children have the power to elicit our tender and loving feelings. They also have the power to frighten, anger, and embarrass us. From being punished, children learn to distrust and fear their parents. Other than that, children and parents learn nothing. By condoning punishment as a disciplinary tool, we perpetuate the acceptability of the use of force and power to control others. At the same time we perpetuate our ignorance and our fear. We use punishment in order to stop behavior rather than having the courage to confront and understand it. By openly dealing with the underlying causes of the child's behavior, both parent and child have the opportunity to get a better and more realistic view of the child's actions, and any potential danger to the child and/or to the parent. We evolved to protect children from harm, not to harm them.

The belief in our society that punishing children will make them into social beings reveals our alienation from the socialization process that is normal and natural to our species. *We become genuine social beings from developing in relation to tender, nurturing, and non-harmful others.* Alienated from our own need for tenderness, and hardened since birth by life in a non-nurturing society, we teach our children that punishing them is proper parenting that will help them to grow right and to be good. We do not seem to understand that punishment does not make children social, it merely teaches them to fit into a society which separates us from each other – a society which is not based on the human capacity for tenderness or on concern for another, but on the absence of these. Punishing our children sabotages the nurturing and protective feelings that we evolved to have towards them. It destroys the unity of parent and child. It teaches us to violate the rights of others. As a socially condoned practice in child rearing, it damages and insults the human species.

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\*For references, see: <http://goo.gl/v0V7U>

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Next – Section Five – Chapter 27 – “On Seeing Children as ‘Cute’” by John Holt