

APSAC's Position on Corporal Punishment

APSAC Prevention Committee

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) is the leading national organization supporting professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment. APSAC works toward a world where all maltreated and at-risk children and their families receive the highest level of professional commitment and service, prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of children. To that end, APSAC calls for the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment and physical discipline of children in all environments including in schools and at home. Corporal punishment is herein defined as “the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child’s behavior.”¹ Physical force in the form of hitting is often referred to as spanking, swatting, whipping, whooping, popping, smacking, slapping, or paddling—all of which are behaviors used in the name of child discipline. Studies show that corporal punishment is very common in the U.S.^{2,3} In about 50% of families, corporal punishment is used against children by the time they are 1–1/2 years old.^{4,5}

APSAC is committed to ending all abuse of children and promoting children’s welfare. Given the research evidence about the harms associated with corporal punishment, APSAC opposes hitting children for discipline or other purposes. APSAC calls for the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment in part because it increases children’s risk for physical abuse.^{6,8} The Adverse Childhood Experiences research found that 28% of adults experienced some form of physical punishment as a child, including being pushed, grabbed, slapped, or hit.⁹ Consistent with other research, a major Canadian study found that nearly three quarters of all cases of “substantiated physical abuse” began as corporal punishment.¹⁰ Young children who experience corporal punishment are at greater risk for Child Protective Services involvement.¹¹ Additionally, corporal punishment

is related to a host of negative outcomes for children, including risk for child behavioral problems such as increased aggression and antisocial behavior.^{7,12,13} No studies show that corporal punishment has positive effects on children or leads to improved child behavior.^{7,14,15}

APSAC members are in an excellent position to educate parents and caregivers of children, as well as individuals who work with children and families, about the negative consequences associated with the use of corporal punishment. APSAC advocates for behaviors and practices that will develop caring and responsible individuals and recommends strategies that will nurture, teach, and guide children and adolescents while supporting and promoting the child’s dignity. APSAC recommends professionals engage in the following:

- Inform parents, caregivers, teachers, and the general public about the harmful effects of corporal punishment;
- Educate parents, caregivers, and teachers about age-specific expectations for child skills, behavior, and development;
- Provide parents, caregivers, teachers, pediatricians, clinicians, and other professionals who work with parents and families with suggestions for positive parenting approaches that use non-physical forms of child guidance, for example, teaching children limit setting, self-regulation, and respect for self and others.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), adopted in November 1989, specifies that all governments who ratified the Convention must take appropriate measures to protect children from all forms of physical and mental violence, including corporal punishment. The UN CRC strongly supports parents providing nonviolent guidance and direction to their children. In schools, administrators and teachers are to take into account the child’s “human dignity”

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and eliminate any physical discipline practices that may cause physical or mental harm.¹⁶ Hitting family members other than children, as well as hitting acquaintances or strangers, is considered assault and a crime. Children, too, have the right and need to be afforded the same consideration in all settings.

Research shows that use of corporal punishment varies by culture, nationality, race, and ethnicity—that is, corporal punishment is more commonly used and more accepted in some cultural contexts.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ However, corporal punishment is associated with negative outcomes for children across cultural contexts.^{20,21} Globally, there is growing commitment to a universal ban against corporal punishment. As of May 2016, 49 countries worldwide had prohibited all corporal punishment of children, including in the home and at least 54 more countries had expressed a commitment to full prohibition. (For the most current list, see: <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/>)

Furthermore, the APSAC position statement is informed by professional position statements against corporal punishment or addressing better alternatives to child discipline issued by:

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry's Maltreatment and Violence Committee
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
- American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA)
- National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP)

- National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence (NPEIV)
- Save the Children
- Section 37 of the American Psychological Association (APA) – Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice
- The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)

Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued a technical package called Preventing child abuse and neglect: A technical package for policy, norm, and programmatic activities on strategies and approaches for preventing child abuse and neglect.²² Legislative bans on corporal punishment, as evidenced in 49 countries worldwide, is an effective strategy proposed by CDC as an approach for changing social norms to support parents and positive parenting.

Therefore, building on the growing global progress toward universal prohibition of corporal punishment of children, in a commitment to promote quality, safe, and nurturing environments where children can grow and develop to their full potential, APSAC calls for the elimination of all forms of corporal punishment of children in all settings including homes and schools. APSAC pledges an active role to inform our allied professionals, policy makers, and the general public about the risk factors associated with the corporal punishment of children.

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Selected Additional Readings on Parental Discipline & Parent Training

Resources for Parents:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Preventing child abuse and neglect: A technical package for policy, norm, and programmatic activities*: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/can-prevention-technical-package.pdf>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Essentials for Parenting*: <http://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/index.html>

American Psychological Association, *ACT Raising Safe Kids Parenting Program*: <http://www.apa.org/pi/prevent-violence/programs/act.aspx>

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