

Corporal Punishment in Schools

Rania Hannan, MSW

Many people are surprised to learn that the use of corporal punishment (CP) is still legal in public schools in 19 states and in private schools in 48 states. Permissible CP in schools typically refers to “the deliberate infliction of physical pain by hitting, paddling, spanking, slapping, or any other physical force used as a means of discipline” (Texas Education Code, 2013). CP in public schools is more common in Southern states (e.g., Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas, where half of all students attend schools that use CP) and, generally speaking, in states with higher proportions of childhood poverty, child death rates, and adults without high school diplomas (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). During the 2013–2014 school year, approximately 109,000 students received CP (Education Week Research Center, 2016).

Studies have shown that CP administered by parents leads to negative child outcomes. Although there are fewer studies on school CP per se, in general these studies show that CP is ineffective at disciplining children and CP by teachers and school administrators can lead to many of the same negative consequences as CP by parents (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). In a meta-analysis of 27 studies, Gershoff (2002) found no evidence that CP is associated with less aggression. In fact, research shows that the more a child receives CP, the more aggressive he or she is likely to be. There is also no evidence that the use of CP is associated with better self-control skills or social skills (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). CP in schools has been associated with problematic physical outcomes and psychological outcomes, including greater use of violence, greater sense of alienation, reduced student self-esteem, and reduced student academic achievement (Hyman, 1995; Hyman & Perone, 1998). Researchers have also found that CP can have long-term consequences. Studies show that use of CP in childhood increased the likelihood of de-

veloping mental health issues, such as antisocial behavior, addiction, mood disorders, and personality disorders (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Gershoff, 2002).

CP against students is more common toward boys. Boys are, on average, four times as likely as girls to receive CP in schools (Gershoff & Font, 2016). In North Carolina, 83% of reported discipline cases were male (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). CP toward both sexes has gradually decreased over time; however, boys have always constituted a larger proportion at each time point studied (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). Given the association between CP and behavior problems, it is important to note that boys who develop behavior problems in early childhood experience a larger negative impact on high school and college completion rates than girls (Owens, 2016).

Research also shows that the use of CP against students disproportionately affects disabled students and minority students. Black students are twice as likely as white students to receive CP from teachers and school administrators (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). The rate of CP against black students has remained nearly the same over the years, while it has decreased for white students. That is, in 1976, black students were 1.9 times more likely than white students to receive CP; 30 years later, that number actually increased slightly to 2.2.

In fact, 22% of students attending schools that allow CP are black, yet they accounted for 38% of cases of students receiving CP during the 2013–2014 school year (Education Week Research Center, 2016). This disparity is substantially larger in some states. In Maine, black students received physical punishment 8 times more than white students during the 2011–2012 school year (Startz, 2016). One explanation for this discrepancy is that black students are discriminated against when it comes to who receives punishment and to what extent (Eitle & Eitle, 2004). The American Psychological As-

sociation Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) posits that there is no evidence that black children have higher rates of misbehavior; in actuality, they receive harsher punishment than their white peers for the same misbehaviors.

Documentation of school CP among disabled students is equally disturbing. Data from the 2006–2007 school year show that roughly 42,000 disabled students in public schools received CP (Farmer, 2008). An in-depth investigation discovered that disabled children were receiving physical punishment for displaying behaviors that were symptoms of their disabilities or conditions (including autism, Tourette Syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder, and dyslexia) (Farmer, 2008). In many states, disabled students are much more likely to receive CP than their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). As

noted in the November 2016 “Open Letter to Local and State Educational Agencies & Policymakers,” written by the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) and signed by many other organi-

zations including APSAC, across several states during the 2011–2012 school year, students with disabilities were over 5 times more likely to receive CP than students without disabilities. During the 2005–2006 school year in Arizona, disabled children received CP at a rate that was almost 6 times higher than that for non-disabled children. In other words, disabled students made up only 13% of the total student population in Arizona, while they were 43% of the students receiving CP during that school year.

Many supporters of CP in schools argue that it increases academic success. However, evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between the presence of school corporal punishment and low overall academic achievement (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). Another common argument in favor of CP in schools is that it is an effective last resort method for serious infractions. Yet much of this type of discipline is a result of offenses that are decidedly minor compared with what one would consider a serious infraction. Just a few examples in-

clude the following: running down the hallway, being late to class, mispronouncing words, violating the dress code, talking back to teachers, and sleeping in class (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003; Farmer, 2008). A 2013 report released by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction showed that 48% of cases of CP were for disruptive behavior; 26% for inappropriate language, bus misbehavior, or disrespecting staff; and 25% for fighting or aggression. Other existing evidence makes it clear that school CP is not used only as a last resort for students that misbehave often or for serious offenses (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015).

A study of Midwest, South, and Southwest states showed that educators ranked CP as the least effective method of classroom management (Little & Akin-Little, 2008). The fact that the same students receive CP over and over again is just further evidence (Teicher, 2005). To-

day, there is growing support to end CP in schools as educators, policy makers, and the general public become more aware of the indisputable harm of CP against students. As previously noted, the

“No school can be considered safe or supportive if its students are fearful of being physically punished.”

NWLC (2016) and over 80 other organizations posted an open letter (2016) calling for the end to CP in schools. That same week, U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. released a statement addressed to governors and state education administrators also urging the ban of CP in schools. King eloquently summarized the importance of ending CP in schools during a separate press release: “Our schools are bound by a sacred trust to safeguard the wellbeing, safety and extraordinary potential of the children and youth within the communities they serve. No school can be considered safe or supportive if its students are fearful of being physically punished (King, 2016).”

About the Author

Rania Hannan, MSW is a graduate from the University of Michigan. Her current research focuses on fatherhood engagement in Flint, MI, and past work includes a thesis on theory of mind across genders and lifespan. Her research interests include fatherhood involvement, second generation Americans, housing insecurity, and mental health.

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Corporal Punishment in Schools

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