

## **Ten Reasons I Can't Spank**

**By Gregory K. Popcak, MSW, LCSW, a Catholic Counselor's Critical Examination of Corporal Punishment**

“How do you feel about corporal punishment?”

.... my journey... reflects the research, thoughts, and prayerful consideration of a conservative Catholic, psychotherapist, father of two, and author on marriage and family issues. Ultimately, this article is the foundation upon which my wife and I build our commitment to disciplining our children without corporal punishment. ....

### *1. Jesus' Own Example was Discipline, NOT Punishment.*

There is an important distinction to be made between discipline and punishment. Jesus' own ministry favored discipline over punishment....Literally, punishment means, “to cause to undergo pain.” At its very roots, it has nothing to do with teaching. Punishment establishes a police/suspect relationship between punisher and the punished. Punishment relies heavily upon the notion of external control. That is to say, the parent is very pessimistic regarding the child's desire, ability or willingness to behave properly, so the parent himself becomes the child's limit and consequence... The philosophy that supports punishment asserts that compliance with the law for the law's own sake (“blind obedience”) is a virtue. Spanking is the chief example of punishment. It is the height of external control.

Discipline assumes a teacher/student relationship, or Rabbi/disciple relationship if you prefer. The Latin root of discipline, “discipuli,” means, “student”.

Discipline's main objective is to teach the offender what to do ...rather than merely stopping the offence. For example, where punishment would say, “Don't speak to me like that! Go to your room!” Discipline would say, “I know you are angry, but you may not speak to me that way. You may say (such and such) if you like. Now, tell me again, respectfully, please.”

Discipline is less concerned with teaching compliance with the law than it is with teaching how to have deeper, more respectful and loving relationships. Discipline recognizes that “love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom. 13:10.... Discipline does not assume malicious intent on the part of the offender. It assumes that the offender is ignorant of an appropriate/meaningful way to meet personal needs. ...

Discipline believes that good behavior is a teachable skill, not unlike math or reading. Because of this, it makes use of the tools that a good teacher would use. Tools like: good relationship/rapport building, teaching stories (“emotional word pictures“), following through with logical consequences, real life examples, personal sharing (discipling), redirecting, practice, and giving information in respectful, repeated and varied ways. People who use discipline correctly do not necessarily differ in the number of limits they

establish, so much as in the dramatically different ways by which those limits are taught and enforced.

Certainly you can see that Jesus' ministry was one which espoused discipline over punishment. Discipline recognizes that violence is not a good teaching tool. Imagine the following happening to you. Your child comes home from school and says that he was spanked because he missed a math problem. You call the teacher to say, "What were you thinking?"

The teacher responds by saying, "He did not do the problem as I taught him to." "You should have told him again!"

"I told him plenty of times. He should have listened the first time."

You press further, "Even so, what do you think he really learned.?"

"Well, you can be sure he won't make that mistake again!"

What do you think of this teacher? Was he a good teacher? I don't think so. I wonder if God thinks the same of us when we use corporal punishment to "teach a lesson" to his children who are on loan to us. ....

## *2. Scripture Does Not Support Spanking*

The Old Testament does have two references to corporal punishment, which are the mainstay of its proponents' biblical defense. These are Proverbs 23:13 and Sirach 30:1-3. ...

Ultimately, the Old Testament must be understood through the prism of the New Testament - the fulfillment of the law. Indeed, the Fathers of the Church, saints and prelates from St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. Cyprian, St. Ambrose, St. Martin of Tours and St. Leo, consistently declared that the severe sanctions of the Old Testament were abrogated by the mild and gentle laws of Christ. The New Testament has a very different way of dealing with sinners than did the Old Testament.

## *3. . The Universal Church Does Not Model Corporal Punishment*

Modern Catholic scholars reflect this conviction when they say that this legacy of corporal punishment ". . . reflect[s] neither the spirit nor the methods Christ who said: 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart'." and that the Church should not "employ physical force to coerce the mind of man. . . Our only instruments in the domain of conscience must be reason, God's grace, human kindness and love."

## *4. Spanking Flies in the Face of Good Science*

The Church respects good science because it simply describes the Natural Order created by God. To deny the validity of scientific inquiry, and the truth and relevance of its discoveries is to turn a blind eye to a part of God's revelation to man....

- \* In study after study, spanking has been found to increase deceitfulness, noncompliance, oppositional/defiant behaviors and violence in children.
- \* Research consistently demonstrates that corporal punishment creates and maintains "willful defiance" and other unmanageable behavioral problems. (Thus, the notion that "willful defiance" deserves corporal punishment is exactly counterproductive).
- \* Children who are spanked have lower average intelligence scores, and demonstrate poorer school performance. This is not because they are less intelligent, but because they are more reluctant to demonstrate their intelligence for fear of being 'wrong' and, as a result, harshly judged.
- \* Spanked children show less creativity and are less inclined to take healthy and appropriate risks; yet are more likely to take inappropriate risks.
- \* Children who are spanked demonstrate a diminished ability to say 'no' in personally demeaning or dangerous situations (including drug use and sexual situations) - especially when encouraged by peers.
- \* Spanking has been shown to significantly increase violent/bullying behavior (especially in boys) and shyness (in girls).
- \* Children who are spanked have higher rates of constipation of the bowels, depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and irrational fears/phobias.
- \* Long-term studies indicate that girls who are spanked show a greater risk of ending up in abusive marriages; boys who are spanked have a higher than average chance of becoming abusive spouses.
- \* Adults who were spanked as children tend to be less happy in their marriages.
- \* Adults who were spanked as children tend to reject the religion of their parents. All of the above - and more - have been attributed not to abusive levels of corporal punishment or violence to children, but, rather, to commonly accepted level of spanking. These are the scientific findings of the profession. ...

### *5. Spanking Is Violence*

Webster defines violence as "physical force used so as to injure." Having scientifically established that spanking does cause injury (although, in most instances, not immediately perceptible), it follows that spanking is a form of violence. ....

About the culture that must exist in the family which espouses and lives the "Gospel of Life", Holy Father says this:

"It is above all in raising children that the family fulfills its mission to proclaim the Gospel of life. By word and example, in the daily round of relations and choices, and through concrete actions and signs, parents lead their children to authentic freedom, actualized in the sincere gift of self, and they cultivate in them a respect for others, a sense of justice, cordial openness, dialog, generous service, solidarity, and all the other values which help people live life as a gift." (The Gospel of Life)

The evidence is compelling that corporal punishment does not instill in our children or lead them toward any of these qualities. In fact, it tends to cultivate deceitfulness, violence, fear, and a rejection of parents' authority and religion as arbitrary and nonsensical. ....

### *6. Spanking as Sin or Occasion of Sin*

Most parents who use corporal punishment admit to having struck their children "unjustly" (i.e. through some fault of their own, rather than the child's). This mistake is certainly one all parents have made, regardless of admission; and one most admit is sinful. If spanking unjustly is sinful, then the risk of sinning by spanking at all is unacceptably high. As Catholics, we are obliged not only to avoid sin, but to avoid the near occasion of sin, and entreat the Lord to "lead us not into temptation." Especially, we must avoid the temptation to do harm to the least of His children.

### *7. God's Justice is Subject to His Love*

Parents who use corporal punishment often defend it by saying, "God is a God of Justice." Certainly, but His Justice is subject to His Love. If this were not so, could any of us, in light of our own sinfulness, justify our existence, much less the precious gift of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection? How telling are the Scriptures: "If you mark our iniquities, then who could stand?"; and Liturgy: "O felix culpa, quae talum ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem" ("Oh happy fault, which gained for us so great a Redeemer").

Scripture tells us that the greatest of the spiritual gifts - of which Justice is one - is Love. Love is defined for us: "Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never rude, neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong, but rejoices with the truth. There is no limit to Love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure." (1 Cor. 13: 4-7)

...As Christians, we are not called so much to be the administrators of His Justice ("Judge not, lest ye be judged.") as we are called to be the embodiment of His Love, perfected in humanity - and for humanity - by Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you." ....

### *8. Spanking does not Respect the Gift of Will*

The Church, Scripture, and good science teach us that the will is a good and essential part of our humanity. We Catholics have what might appear to be a hopelessly optimistic and respectful attitude toward the human will. Scripture tells us that from our creation, the will is given to us as a gift from God. Holy Father and the Church have endorsed the goodness of the human will. Science has described the will as essential to survival and continuation of our human species. As Catholics, we hold a unique place in the support and defense of the dignity of the human person; and the will is integral to the definition of our human condition. We are responsible for living and educating our children to live in a way that respects the will - and its prominent role in the process of right living. To do less, to give in to non-Catholic pressure and influences which instruct us to "parent" in a manner which is demeaning or harmful to the will, is to deny this uniquely Catholic perspective toward our humanity. ...

### *9. Spanking Conflicts with the Church's Teaching on the Age of Reason.*

Spanking is used most often on children who are younger than the age of seven, which is

the age of reason as defined by the Church. Most supporters of corporal punishment admit that spanking tends to lose its “effectiveness” past this age. ...

Any form of punishment which serves to debilitate the will, or works to subordinate it to the will of another; and which holds the child culpable before the age of reason is in conflict with the God given nature of the child and the teaching of the Church. Spanking is both destructive of the necessary educational process and punishing of those who are innocent of it.

#### *10. Catholic Luminaries in Child-Rearing Oppose Spanking*

Catholics whose life's vocations involved the care of children, and who received graces to fulfill these vocations, categorically oppose corporal punishment. St. John Bosco, St. Elizabeth Seton, Father Flanagan and Maria Montessori are prominent examples of Catholics whose love and wisdom helped shepherd thousands of children on a path to God, and who saw corporal punishment as antithetical to this mission. .... Conclusion

Well, there you have it - ten reasons I, as a Catholic, loyal to the teaching Magisterium of the Church, family counselor and father believe corporal punishment and Catholicism do not mix. I ask you to consider these reasons with openness to the fullness of life as seen and taught by the Church, and with a real desire to seek the truth.

To renounce corporal punishment is a “conversion”; it is to begin the difficult journey which consists in “putting new wine in new skins”. You will not be alone. The Wisdom, Grace and Love of the Holy Trinity will guide you. Should you decide to continue spanking, you ought to prepare a defense to Christ's pronouncement of love: “What you do to the least of these, you do to Me.”

About the author:

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