

Corporal punishment in American schools

Introduction

Schools are intended to be nurturing environments where every child can learn, thrive, and feel secure. However, when children break rules or engage in disruptive behavior, schools need to respond effectively while prioritizing the safety and well-being of all students. Unfortunately, some institutions resort to physical punishment as a means of control. Research indicates that such approaches are counterproductive, often leading to increased defiance and resistance rather than fostering cooperation.

Corporal punishment has significant negative implications, including heightened levels of stress, depression, and diminished self-esteem. These detrimental effects can severely hinder a child's potential for success both academically and in their broader life experiences. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) outlines a clear stance against physical punishment in schools, supported by compelling evidence. Key findings include:

- Spanking, slapping, and similar punitive measures are associated with a rise in problematic behaviors over time.
- Disproportionately, physical punishment is more frequently applied to Black children and those with disabilities compared to their peers.
- There is a strong correlation between physical punishment and negative outcomes such as mental health challenges, cognitive difficulties, and poor academic performance.

Fortunately, alternative, non-violent disciplinary methods have been identified that promote effective behavior management while nurturing a safe and healthy learning environment for all students. Every child deserves to grow and learn in a setting free from fear and pain. ¹

Physical discipline is still widespread in U.S. schools.

Physical (or corporal) punishment means using physical force, no matter how light, to cause deliberate pain or discomfort in response to an unwanted behavior. In school settings, this often means striking a child on the buttocks (spanking or paddling), but it can also mean slapping, hitting, throwing, or shaking a child, or forcing them to stay in uncomfortable positions for long periods.

Based on a Supreme Court ruling handed down in 1977, states have authority over the issue of corporal punishment in schools. Most states have banned it in public school settings. However, the practice is still legal (though sometimes restricted) in 17 states as of August 2023, and only three states—Iowa, New Jersey, and Maryland—have banned physical discipline in private schools.¹

The latest estimate from the National Center for Education Statistics suggests that more than 70,000 public school kids face physical punishment at least once during the school year.

Where Corporal Punishment Still Exists

In March 2023, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona penned a letter to administrators and policymakers calling for the ban of corporal punishment in education settings.²

“Unfortunately, some schools continue to put the mental and physical well-being of students at risk by implementing the practice of corporal punishment,” said Cardona. “Corporal punishment can lead to serious physical pain and injury. It is also associated with higher rates of mental health issues.”²

The U.S. Department of Education defines corporal punishment as “paddling, spanking, or other forms of physical punishment imposed on a child.” Corporal punishment has been banned in most states since the mid-1990s, and the number of students experiencing the punishment has dropped over the past decade. But the practice remains on the books in a stubbornly high number of states.

As of 2024, corporal punishment is legal in 17 states and practiced in 14. An additional six other states have not expressly prohibited it.²

During the 2017-18 school year, roughly 69,000 students received corporal punishment, down from 107,000 in 2013. The most recent number available—about 20,000 students in 2020-21—is much lower because in-person instruction and data reporting were disrupted during the pandemic.

All this despite major public health organizations calling for an outright ban of corporal punishment in schools.²

The World Health Organization classified corporal punishment as “a violation of children’s rights to respect for physical integrity and human dignity, health, development, education, and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

In August 2023, the American Academy of Pediatrics called for corporal punishment to be banned in school settings and that it be replaced with other practices to support student behavior.²

The Impact on Students

Proponents of corporal punishment argue that inflicting pain upon a child acts as a deterrent for misbehavior and helps instill discipline.²

However, research clearly shows that schools that have utilized physical forms of discipline have not been as successful at correcting unwanted behavior as schools that do not use corporal punishment. Studies also have shown that students who are victims of corporal punishment are more likely to exhibit aggression, anxiety, and depression. “No evidence exists that removing corporal punishment from schools creates a statewide permissive environment where youth fail to control their behavior,” wrote Elizabeth Gershoff of the University of Texas in 2012.

And corporal punishment has significant negative effects on students' overall mental wellbeing and can lead to serious physical injury. In 2003, the Society for Adolescent Medicine estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 students require medical attention as a result of school corporal punishment each year. ²

Students who have experienced this punishment are also more likely to feel alienated from their school, which can be detrimental to academic achievement. “It sends a message to students that we don’t value them enough to work through things the right way,” McNair says.

The practice helps perpetuate a cycle of violence, Cardona said in his letter to school leaders. “Corporal punishment may impress upon students who are subjected to this practice—directly and indirectly—that violence is an acceptable means of problem-solving and conflict resolution, as research shows that the practice is associated with future incidents of domestic violence,” he wrote ²

Who’s Being Hit the Most?

Nationwide, Black students and students with disabilities are twice as likely to receive corporal punishment in school as white students without disabilities. Boys are four times more likely to be hit than girls. The majority of students who received corporal punishment were in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas ²

The violence Black students and disabled students face within education has shown to be connected to a longer history of racism in the United States. A 2021 study found that states with higher use of corporal punishment also had long histories of lynching. ²

Mississippi formerly led the nation in the highest number of lynchings from 1882 to 1968, according to the NAACP. Presently, Mississippi schools corporally punish their children the most.

“This country was founded on punishment as a way of dealing with things. Corporal punishment, incarceration, and enslavement are all baked into our society. It’s automatic to think of punishment when someone breaks the rules,” says David Yusem, a restorative justice coordinator for Oakland Unified School District. ²

Yusem believes corporal punishment does not teach children about their misbehaviors. Instead, it just instills fear. ²

Children of color and children with disabilities are hit more often

Racism and discrimination are serious threats to the health and academic success of children. Unfortunately, these practices are closely linked with physical punishment in U.S. schools.¹

U.S. Department of Education figures on public school students in grades K-12 show that Black males are nearly twice as likely to be hit or spanked as their white peers. Black females are more than three times as likely as their white peers to face physical punishment.¹

Children with disabilities also face higher rates of physical punishment at school than their peers. An estimated 16.5% of all kids who are hit or spanked during the school year are eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Many of these students, especially those with intellectual disabilities, may not fully understand why they are being punished. Their confusion can intensify the negative impact of the physical pain they feel.¹

Corporal Punishment in Schools

Among US schools that use corporal punishment, racial, gender, and ability disparities exist: students who have disabilities and identify as Black or male are more likely to experience corporal punishment than students who do not have disabilities and identify as white or female.⁵ “Adultification bias,” in which “adults perceive Black youth as being older than they actually are,”⁸ may be one type of bias that may lead educators to justify more harsh punishment of Black students.⁹ National data show that Black boys are nearly twice as likely to be struck as white boys (14% vs 7.5%), and Black girls are more than 3 times as likely to be struck as white girls (5.2% vs 1.7%).¹⁰ Analysis of state-level data shows that some states have even greater disparities in the use of corporal punishment against Black students compared with white students.^{3,6}

Fourteen percent of children and adolescents aged 3 through 21 years are identified as having a disability, defined by receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (these are students with an Individualized Education Program).¹² National data show that among students who received physical punishment at school, 16.5% were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; therefore, students with disabilities are overrepresented among students who are physically punished at school.⁴ Analysis of state-level data shows that some states have greater disparities in the use of corporal punishment against students with identified disabilities versus those without.⁵ When students with disabilities are subjected to corporal punishment for behaviors associated with their disabilities, they are unjustly and excessively punished and deprived of access to quality education and a safe learning environment.⁵ Students with intellectual disability who receive corporal punishment may find it challenging to

understand social rules, the consequence of their actions, or the reason behind their punishment. In addition, they may be unable to communicate the incident to their parent(s). For students possessing more than one marginalized identity (eg, race and ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation), the presence of these shared identities may target them for increased corporal punishment and demonstrates the unique perils described by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality framework¹³

Corporal punishment is not effective as a disciplinary method. The majority of studies about the effects of corporal punishment on children and adolescents have focused on punishment used by parents or primary caregivers and have been reviewed elsewhere.⁴ Meta-analyses conducted in 2013 and 2016 indicate that spanking by parents or primary caregivers is associated with worse, not better, behaviors among children.¹⁰ A 2017 survey study among parents from a variety of countries and cultures suggests that use of corporal punishment is associated with more problematic, externalizing behaviors among children across cultures, regardless of parental perception of the severity or justness of the punishment.¹³ In the short term, corporal punishment may cause a child or adolescent to be fearful and immediately obedient. However, over the long term, corporal punishment does not improve behavior. Corporal punishment by parents or caregivers is associated with a range of negative effects among children and adolescents, including a higher incidence of behavior and mental health problems, impaired cognitive development, poor educational outcomes, impaired social-emotional development, problems with the ongoing relationship between parents and children, a higher risk for physical abuse, increased aggression and perpetration of violence, antisocial behavior, and decreased moral internalization of appropriate behavior.¹⁶ A meta-analysis of studies regarding spanking and child outcomes found that being spanked as a child was associated with adult antisocial behavior, adult mental health problems, and adult support for physical punishment.¹⁰ Studies regarding use of physical punishment and outcomes necessarily use observational rather than experimental designs and show association rather than causation; however, the consistency of findings across studies and over time suggests that it may be appropriate to draw causal conclusions.¹⁶

Recommendations to the U.S. Government on Addressing Corporal Punishment in Schools

1. ****Federal Ban on Corporal Punishment****: Enact nationwide legislation that explicitly bans corporal punishment in all public and private schools across the United States, ensuring a consistent standard for child discipline and protecting the rights and well-being of all students.
2. ****Incentivize Non-Violent Alternatives****: Develop grant programs to support schools in implementing evidence-based non-violent disciplinary practices such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and positive behavior interventions. This could help create a more supportive and constructive school environment.

3. ****Allocate Resources for Training****: Provide funding for comprehensive training programs for educators and school staff on effective and humane classroom management techniques. These programs should emphasize conflict resolution, de-escalation strategies, and ways to foster a positive school climate.
4. ****Strengthen Reporting and Accountability Measures****: Establish a system for monitoring and reporting the use of corporal punishment in schools, holding districts accountable for adopting non-violent disciplinary practices. This could include regular audits and compliance checks.
5. ****Engage Stakeholders in Policy Development****: Encourage collaboration between policymakers, educators, parents, and child advocacy groups to develop inclusive policies on student discipline. Creating a task force that draws from a wide range of expertise can help identify the most effective strategies for child development and education.

By taking these steps, the U.S. government can significantly reduce the incidence of corporal punishment in schools, promote healthier and more equitable learning environments, and ultimately enhance the educational experience for all students.

Sources

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