

# Corporal Punishment

*"...an official of the National Foster Parent Association (stated): 'These children have been abused, and when they come into your home, you don't know what abuse they've already suffered, so you don't want to compound this. You don't want to hit these children.'"*<sup>†</sup>

In most states, corporal punishment, which may include spanking, striking, punching, hitting, and slapping, is not permitted with foster children under any circumstances. Check with your caseworker about the exact regulations in your state.

While many parents don't consider the occasional spanking to be harmful, foster children can present a very special case. Corporal punishment is controversial for any child. Some experts assert that it harms a child's development, while others claim that, at the right time and used with care, it can help. Whatever view you as a parent lean toward, we want to make it crystal clear that spanking and other forms of corporal punishment can be disastrous for foster children because:

1. A high percentage of foster children have previously experienced corporal punishment, sometimes to the extreme. Corporal punishment often amounts to physical abuse, some of it severe. Many of these children have been traumatized by those extreme forms of punishment prior to entering foster homes. They might be highly vulnerable to being re-traumatized by threats of or actual use of corporal punishment. To them, it is easy to confuse any physical "discipline" with physical abuse.
2. Foster children very often have insecure attachment, and physical punishment can be frightening to a child, thereby increasing insecurity. They need to turn to caregivers, such as foster parents, when they feel insecure and afraid, but may be less likely to do that if the foster parents become the very source of some of their fear (because of physical punishment).

Physical punishment can damage the parent-child relationship. When parents, who are supposed to protect and comfort the child, use harsh or painful punishment, feelings of anxiety, fear and anger are evoked in the child. This can cause children to avoid the parents. This avoidance damages and erodes the bonds of trust, security, and closeness that are the hallmarks of a healthy relationship between a parent and a child. In fact, repeated spanking may cause agitated and aggressive behavior in the child that might lead to physical altercations between the parent and child, further damaging their relationship.

<sup>†</sup> The Washington Post, 3 September 2000

## Our Own Life Experiences Can Shape Our Beliefs About Spanking

*"I had whippings as a boy, and it didn't hurt me any."*

The tendency for some prospective foster parents is to believe that spanking is harmless or even beneficial. They think that they received spankings as a child and, in their opinion, deserved it and benefited from it. They might also believe that spanking has been effective with their birth children. Since spanking helped them and their own children, they believe it is reasonable to expect that it will work with foster children. Nonetheless, foster children require different forms of discipline. Foster children have already been hurt enough.

### **Parting Thoughts about Using Corporal Punishment with Foster Children**

1. If a child has been hurt badly, spanking will be like water off a duck's back. If it doesn't work (and it won't), many foster parents may become frustrated and hit harder.
2. Foster parent may be drawn into crossing the line into unreasonable physical punishment and may be subject to allegations if provoked by a child or if "reasonable" punishment is ineffective.
3. Spanking is not the only disallowed form of punishment related to foster care.

As an example of one state's forbidden punishments, visit:

<http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/CDHS-ChildYouthFam/CBON/1251583639322>

(Click on Rule 7.708, "Family Foster Care Home" to see Colorado's policy on punishment of children in foster care from the Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Care website.)

## Additional Resources:

For additional readings on spanking and other forms of corporal punishment, please refer to:

- Straus, M.A., & Donnelly, D.A. (1994).  
*Beating the devil out of them: Corporal punishment in American families.*  
San Francisco, CA: Lexington Books
  
- Article from the Psychological Bulletin, written by E. T. Gershoff (2002):  
*Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences*  
(<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/bul-1284539.pdf>)
  
- Article from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (1998): *Guidance for effective discipline*  
(<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/101/4/723.full.pdf>)
  
- Article from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP):  
*Disciplining your child*  
(<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx>)