Corporal Punishment Can Hurt Teachers, Too

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A major issue in education today centers around the use of corporal punishment in the schools. Although some groups maintain that corporal punishment always has been, is, and will continue to be a viable means of discipline, others have been emerging in recent years to point out corporal punishment's flaws and to demand its abolition. This second group includes a concerned public as well as the educational leaders of our country, and some of the questions they face and hope to resolve are: What is corporal punishment? Why do teachers use corporal punishment? What effects does corporal punishment have on the student? on the teacher? What are some of the alternatives to corporal punishment? What goals should every teacher strive for? Although this paper will cover, to some extent, each of these questions, the major emphasis of the study is placed on examining the role of the teacher and relating the negative effects of corporal punishment to that role.

"Punishment," according to Richard L. Solomon, "is a noxious stimulus, one which will support, by its termination or omission, the growth of new escape or avoidance responses." Corporal punishment, as applied to the schools, is "any type of punishment or correction administered to a pupil's body in any manner whatsoever, including, but not limited to spanking, paddling, slapping and shaking the student," a legal interpreta-
tion made by Kelly Frels. Corporal punishment may be defined not only in terms of stimulus-response and of the law, but also in terms of motive. Abraham Pallas sees corporal punishment as "a type of control to insure good discipline in a classroom situation." So far, we have three different views presented in these definitions; however, each implies an unpleasant, painful, (or if you prefer) "noxious" situation where control is exerted by one person over another for a purpose.

This "situation of control" has, thankfully, much opposition to face. "Central to all challenges is the charge that corporal punishment constitutes cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment," Frels states. While the Constitution may be under way in defending the student's rights as an individual, the law of our land, nevertheless, upholds the use of corporal punishment by educators in all but three states. Earl Hoffman, who examines the law as it relates to the teacher, explains, "The primary source of legal directions comes from statutory laws established by the individual states." Among these legal directions is, according to Samuel N. Francis and Emma J. Hirschberger, the educator's "legal right to administer reasonable chastisement in the performance of his duties." The question "How reasonable can corporal punishment be?" enters the debate at this point. Can corporal punishment, in this day and age, be considered a reasonable practice at all? Legally, yes. Frels states, "Reasonableness is determined by the size, age, sex, condition,
or disposition of the student under the circumstances."\(^7\) Frels further adds that "the type of instrument used, the part of the body struck, and the force used"\(^8\) are also determining elements of what is considered reasonable. These stipulations appear somewhat vague in their wording and are surely not universal standards followed by all educators everywhere, for just as no two people are alike, no two ideas about what constitutes reasonable corporal punishment will coincide completely. A bad situation is made even worse when Frels says that corporal punishment "may not be administered maliciously or for the purpose of revenge."\(^9\) Unless we have all become mind-readers, who is to say whether a teacher did or did not apply the paddle maliciously? ecstatically? Has a new scale of behavior been developed to determine levels of maliciousness? I think not. However, even though the law does set up the rules used by some teachers to give vent to their vicious ways, this same law can turn against unscrupulous characters. Frels points out, "A teacher who exceeds his common law rights or violates the state statute in using corporal punishment subjects himself to possible civil and criminal liability for assault and battery."\(^10\) It is very important for all teachers to realize that with the right to use corporal punishment (as the law now stands) also comes the responsibility for one's actions, and perhaps the decision not to use corporal punishment is just as important as is the decision to use it.

How do parents feel about the use of corporal punishment
in the schools? Here enters the doctrine of "in loco parentis." Jerry L. Patterson explains, "The right for educators to administer corporal punishment stems from the doctrine of in loco parentis; the teacher stands in place of the parent." This doctrine, which gives the teacher parental power over the student, is very helpful in maintaining the existence of corporal punishment in the schools. But is punishment inflicted by an educator the same as punishment inflicted by a parent? Some believe not. Also, this doctrine seems to shift the blame from one group to another with no relative justification, for parents, too, can be abusive toward their children, and these children need protection from them by the law. Frels further argues, "The doctrine's loss of relevance is particularly evident when the parents, in whose place the teacher stands, do not want their child physically punished." Many parents take this stand and have brought suit against school boards claiming violation of their, and their child's, constitutional rights. Patterson became interested in finding out just how parents in the U. S. did feel about "in loco parentis" in regard to corporal punishment. He conducted a study on this issue in 1973, and his statistics showed that "students and parents believe the use of corporal punishment should not be granted, teachers and building administrators believe its use should be granted." A battle between parent and teacher over punishment of the child emerges from this situation, and many parents want to know just how much say they have concerning their child's physical well-being in the school.
Why do teachers use corporal punishment? "Teacher," in this question, will refer to the average or normal individual; those suffering from obvious personality disorders will not be considered in this paper. Hoffman says, "One of the responsibilities of a teacher is to maintain order and discipline." It is understandable that a teacher who cannot keep an orderly atmosphere in his/her classroom will not remain a teacher for long. Pallas explains, "Corporal punishment is a way for teachers to maintain a favorable atmosphere for learning." I would question the idea of "a favorable atmosphere for learning." Does corporal punishment really establish an environment advantageous to learning? Does it not, rather, establish a convenient atmosphere for teaching for the teacher only?

Bernard Bard cites Dr. David G. Gill of Brandeis University as saying, "Corporal punishment usually serves the needs of the attacking adult who is seeking release from his own anger and stress." Anyone who has had any experience with teaching realizes that the job has many accompanying stresses and strains, and even the strongest-minded of teachers is subject to physical as well as mental exhaustion at times. But do these temporary "collapses" justify the use of corporal punishment? Vincent J. Hawkins focuses briefly on the teacher's psyche, stating, "For many teachers, the job is an egotistical panorama, an opportunity to express authority." Indeed, the position of teacher does give one a feeling of great power over others, and what the teacher does with his/her "power" is crucial to everyone concerned. Most teachers are able to deal with their
command rationally; others, unfortunately, allow their positions of control to eventually gain control over themselves. It is at this point that the teacher has lost respect, not only for him-/herself, but also for the student as a person and as a child. There are also those teachers who believe that corporal punishment is needed for their own personal protection. The article "Beating School Children" points out, however, "Most corporal punishment is aimed at tots (K-6) who do not pose a physical threat to teachers."

So this information further points to the idea that some teachers need to express authority, and, regretfully, many choose corporal punishment to fulfill this need.

"The use of corporal punishment for antisocial behavior is the most prevalent one," according to Pallas. But what distinguishes the antisocial child from the social child? Emery J. Cummins became interested in the question "Are disciplinary students different?" In his study, Cummins hypothesized "that disciplinary offenders would tend to be more flexible, less dogmatic, and hold more emergent value systems than nondisciplinary offenders." He selected a group of students which included "known" disciplinary offenders and administered a battery of tests to all. The results of Cummins' study showed that "the differences between disciplinary and nondisciplinary students . . . appear to be minimal." Do teachers, then, select certain students as "problems," disregarding all others, to be the recipients of corporal punishment? Do these students ever get second chances?
Those groups fighting for the abolition of corporal punishment in the schools are interested in the effects it has on the student. Pallas states, "The evidence seems to support that corporal punishment is not in the best interests of the student." \(^{22}\) It is, perhaps, this knowledge that distresses parents and other concerned individuals the most. What does happen to the child under the jurisdiction of a punitive teacher? Jacob S. Kounin and Paul V. Gump conducted studies comparing the influence of punitive versus nonpunitive teachers upon school children. In one study, Kounin and Gump experimented with various control techniques used by teachers and proved that those techniques "high in clarity (defining the deviancy, specifying how to stop) were most successful," and those techniques "high in roughness (anger, physical handling) were least successful and tended to be followed by behavior disruption (less involvement in work, overt signs of anxiety)." \(^{23}\) A second study looked more closely at the behavior of children who have punitive teachers, and Kounin and Gump showed that these students "manifest more aggression in their misconducts, are more unsettled and conflicted about misconduct in school, are less concerned with learning and school-unique values, show some . . . indication of a reduction in rationality pertaining to school misconduct." \(^{24}\) The findings of this second study paint a picture of confusion, frustration, apathy, and, most important, a lack of concern toward learning on the part of the student. To me, this study proves that the teacher, as a facilitator of learning, should never use cor-
poral punishment. Those teachers who do use it may think they are helping themselves, but they are certainly not helping the student. And students are in school to receive aid from the teacher, not chastisement.

Corporal punishment is not only harmful to the student but also "is detrimental to the professional educator."25 Carolyn T. Schumacher points out that corporal punishment is "inconsistent with current professional standards and with modern concepts of individual human rights."26 The school is the only institution left in our country that condones the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure. With all the modern reforms our institutional establishments have undergone, retaining corporal punishment in the school is quite "old-fashioned." Nat Hentoff, a parent and teacher, believes, "No one who engages in behavior that demeans others can escape being demeaned himself thereby."27 Every profession has certain standards to be followed. With corporal punishment's presence in the schools and with the knowledge that some teachers do and others do not use it on their students, one may conclude that the standards of the teaching profession, in practice, are inconsistent. And those teachers who do use corporal punishment, especially the unprincipled ones, are, by their actions, debasing the integrity of all teachers.

One of the most detrimental effects corporal punishment has on the teacher is that it "discourages teachers from seeking more effective means of discipline."28 Teachers who use corporal punishment excessively will begin to believe that it
is the only way to deal with disciplinary students. If teachers let themselves fall into a routine like this, their intellectual and mental growth as a professional will, ultimately, be stifled, and they will be useless to everyone, including themselves. Another consideration of this dilemma is related to a finding by the N.E.A. task force: "Physical punishment is most often used on students who are physically weaker and smaller than the teacher." What do children think when they see the bigger teacher physically "beating up" the smaller student? Is not the teacher showing the student that "might makes right" by this practice? Schumacher says, "It would be more useful to teach children by example how to deal with frustration without angry and abusive outbursts." This sounds very logical to the casual observer, but a frustrated, tired teacher may not perceive the situation as clearly. However, the teacher, as a responsible adult, has to maintain a tight control over his/her emotions in the classroom, just as most adult, in a social situation, will try to do. Young students, who see violent emotional displays by the teacher, will more often than not come to accept the behavior, and later, as adults, they may incorporate that behavior into their own personalities. Hence, the cycle continues.

An obvious problem, but not one to be ignored, that punitive teachers could face is "civil and criminal liability for assault and battery" (see footnote 10) if parents bring their child's case to court claiming violation of constitution-
al rights. Therefore, teachers who make a practice of using corporal punishment in their classes should make a point of being familiar with the statutes governing them for their own protection.

What alternatives are there to corporal punishment? Hawkins believes that "the alternatives to this problem lie in common sense, preparation of lessons, a level attitude, and . . . sarcasm." These are not easy alternatives. Good judgment many times may mean choosing what is good for the students over what you, as teacher, may personally want. Preparation of lessons is very important in maintaining a good atmosphere for learning. If the teacher is unprepared for the lesson, the students will sense this and become restless and inattentive. The alternative of sarcasm is perhaps the most difficult of all to employ. Many times, students will appreciate and respond more quickly to the ironical gibe or "cut-down" than they will to a crack across the rear. The article "The Corporal Punishment Mess in the Schools" cites an educator from Illinois, Robert J. Martwick, who suggests "parent conferences, detention, extra work assignments, guidance counseling, inschool suspension, . . . suspension, expulsion, court referral, and arrest" as other possible alternatives to corporal punishment. A good method to begin with for teachers who do not want to use corporal punishment is the control technique high in clarity (see footnote 23). Teachers many times take it for granted that the student knows what he/she has done wrong when he/she may
not. A second problem is that many teachers fail to explain to students how their misbehavior may be corrected. As a result, the problem continues, and resentment between student and teacher remains.

Ideally, every teacher sets certain goals for him-her self and will work toward achieving these goals to the best of his/her ability. According to Hentoff, "the goal of education in a free society, after all, is to enable young people to learn how to be free, independent citizens."33 Schumacher supports this idea: "Teachers must actively promote more freedom in the classroom."34 Does corporal punishment teach children concepts of freedom and independence, or the dogma of authoritarianism? This does not mean to imply that all authority is wrong, for surely authority has its place in our society. And authority of the teacher is important in the school. However, as Hentoff points out, "Teachers have to earn their authority by being able to explain convincingly what it is they want their students to do and why,"35 just as our political leaders have to earn the public's respect and support.

"Good discipline parallels good teaching. Teachers and administrators are supposed to be facilitators of learning, not the coercers of facts,"36 states Hawkins. The question that remains unanswered for many is whether corporal punishment constitutes "good teaching" in this modern age and, supposedly, free society. Many stipulations have been placed on the use of corporal punishment in recent years: it can only be used
by the teacher as a "last resort," there must be a witness to the punishment, parental permission must be obtained before punishment can be carried out, a notice of the punishment and hearing of the case must take place before punishment, and a report of the punishment must be filed after administration. These restraints are making it more and more difficult (and legally dangerous) for teachers to use physical chastisement on the student, and it seems reasonable to predict that teacher access to corporal punishment will come to an end in the near future due to changes in the law.
Footnotes


4 Frels, p. 152.

5 Earl Hoffman, "The Law and the Teacher," Grade Teacher, 89 (Sept. 1971), 144.


7 Frels, pp. 151-52.

8 Frels, p. 152.

9 Frels, p. 151.

10 Frels, p. 152.


12 Frels, p. 150.
13. Patterson, p. 39.


15. Pallas, p. 313.


24. Kounin and Gump, p. 49.


29 "Beating School Children," p. 20.

30 Schumacher, p. 690.

31 Hawkins, p. 226.


33 Hentoff, p. 19.

34 Schumacher, p. 690.

35 Hentoff, p. 19.

36 Hawkins, p. 226.
Bibliography


"Beating School Children: A practice that doesn't improve their behavior or their learning." American School Board Journal, 160 (June 1973), 19-21.


