

# Columbus Dispatch (OH)

February 19, 2006 Sunday

## A punishing predicament; Spanking still provokes debate among parents, psychologists

By Mark Ellis (mellis@dispatch.com), The Columbus Dispatch

Storm warnings were in the air as a 13-year-old George Chatters approached his East Side home on his bike.

“People in the neighborhood were saying my dad was looking for me,” recalled Chatters, 39. “He was touring the city in his car.”

The youth had broken a family rule not to leave the area without permission.

The enforcer: Dad’s belt.

“I got it really good when I got home,” he said. “I was hardheaded.”

As a father of two, the Pickerington resident favors a less-physical approach to discipline, although he keeps spanking in his toolbox as a last resort.

Many other Americans do, too.

Despite a move away from spanking in recent decades, a majority of U.S. parents still approve of – and sometimes rely on – corporal punishment.

In 1968, according to the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, 94 percent of parents deemed spanking sometimes necessary – a figure that dropped to 61 percent by 2004, according to a national survey commissioned by the Center for Child and Family Studies in San Francisco.

The topic – particularly the question of when physical punishment becomes abuse – lay at the heart of a Hamilton County Municipal Court case in Cincinnati that involved former City Councilman Sam Malone.

He was found not guilty of domestic violence on Friday. He had been accused of beating his 14-year-old son with a belt for disrespecting a teacher.

The teenager suffered welts on his arms, legs, chest and buttocks.

Monitored by discipline experts, the case has refueled debate about physical punishment that causes pain but not injury to a child.

Psychologists are divided over any ban on the physical punishment of children, but even those who see no harm in occasional spanking view it as potentially damaging when used severely or as the main method of discipline.

In a survey, most pediatricians said they advise against physical punishment.

The American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have asked educators to stop spanking students, but the groups haven't told parents never to spank their children.

Physical punishment is outlawed in 14 nations and limited in Canada to those older than 3 and younger than 13.

Twenty-eight states ban such punishment in schools. Ohio leaves the decision to individual districts; about 25 of 613 permit the practice.

Chatters, an author and enrollment adviser at Columbus State Community College, has 11- and 3-year-old daughters with wife Adrienne.

He counts on spanking as the "last layer of discipline – when there's no other means to rectify the problem."

"It's really not necessary to always physically punish," he said. "It can be a stern look or commenting . . . that I'm very disappointed, and then here come the tears."

His next step might be to take away TV, computer or telephone time.

Cari Brackett, an associate professor of pharmacy and family medicine at Ohio State University, remembers slapping her son at age 2 while changing a diaper.

He had kicked her in the face.

"I was hit a lot as a child," said the Grandview Heights mother, 48. "It was a reaction on my part. We both cried."

In the 12 years since, the boy hasn't been struck in discipline.

The approach that Brackett – along with her husband, David Anderson – considers most effective is based on discussing problems and modeling behavior.

"A child is a reflection of who you are and what you have taught him," she said. "If you deal with a child as a well-intentioned, willing-to-learn, willing-to-please little person, and if you

don't put them in a position where they can get themselves into trouble, they will do as you ask because they love you.”

A child who is struck, Brackett said, learns that hitting is acceptable.

“We're admitting we don't know what else to do.”

Keeping youngsters busy and redirecting their behavior before trouble starts represent the best strategies, Dublin psychologist Robert Fathman said.

A spoken reprimand usually suffices – followed by a task or chore “that benefits the injured party.”

The 60-year-old father of four grown children was fond of making them clean his car as punishment.

Fathman serves as president of the nonprofit Center for Effective Discipline in Columbus – which opposes physical punishment.

“Almost all child abuse starts with hitting or shaking,” he said.

As experts acknowledge, however, mild physical punishment is at least immediately effective.

Spanking works in the short term, research indicates, but no better than other methods, said Murray Straus, co-director of the Family Research Laboratory.

“The parent says: ‘That's wrong. You've hurt your brother.’ Almost always, the child stops,” he said. “Just like if you slap a child's hand, they almost always stop.”

“Whatever you do, it takes many repetitions,” he said, because toddlers lack control of their behavior.

“In the longer run, spanking is less effective because it builds up an immunity. And, bit by bit, it chips away at the bond between child and parent.”

As studies show, Straus said, children subjected to frequent physical punishment suffer depression as adults.

Those who say they are unharmed by childhood beatings, he said, are “the lucky ones.”

Strict-parenting advocate John Rosemond – a psychologist, columnist and public speaker from Gastonia, N.C. – challenges such conclusions.

He doesn't advocate spanking but calls it not necessarily harmful.

“Sometimes, with children, you have to do something dramatic in order to create a memory,” he said.

Corporal punishment is most effective with ages 2 to 6, he said, and might be appropriate – but rarely – through 10.

“If you find yourself spanking a lot or . . . on some regular basis with a child older than 6, the message is quite clear: Spanking is not working.”

It should never be impulsive, even in the face of “belligerent defiance,” Rosemond said.

“Cool yourself down.”

The hand is the best tool for the job, he said: An adult whose hand begins to sting while spanking should stop.

A biblical reference (Proverbs 13:24) about the use of a rod for discipline is metaphorical, Rosemond and Fathman said.

They cited it as the cause of too much spanking with an object by parents who interpret the Bible literally.

“The rod was the guiding staff of shepherds,” Fathman said. “The rod was a tool for guidance, not inflicting pain.”

### **BOX STORY:**

Corporal punishment – particularly the question of when it becomes abuse – lay at the heart of a case in Cincinnati that put a former city councilman on trial.

#### ***What they think***

Some comments about physical punishment from experts and parents:

- ▶ “What’s happened to us in American society today is that our children have lost a healthy fear of their parents.

“When my wife and I had to administer a spanking to our children, we told them we’re doing it because we loved them. I’m against . . . striking a child out of anger and frustration.”

– Dave Daubenmire, founder of Pass the Salt Ministries in Hebron and former London High School football coach

- ▶ “I don’t think it’s ever appropriate to spank. What we’re teaching them is, when you’re really frustrated with somebody, hit them.

“Show them what to do when you’re frustrated, and that is to use words.”

– Peggy Shecket of Worthington, parenting consultant

- ▶ “The law clearly states that parents can administer corporal punishment to their children.

“There was a time when I probably swatted my (two) boys a few times on their bottoms with the palm of my hand. It didn’t work very well. It didn’t make me feel very good about myself, either. I just stopped doing it.

“Too often, parents don’t fully recognize the limits children have in terms of understanding what they’re being told by an adult.”

– John Saros, executive director of Franklin County Children Services

- ▶ “Strong scientific evidence shows that spanking leads to short-term cooperation in defiant kids. You have this other effect: Kids who were spanked more last year are more aggressive this year.

“Parents tend to be frustrated when they use it. If they (parents) are out of control, they need to back off and calm themselves down.”

– Robert Larzelere, psychologist and child-discipline researcher  
at the University of Nebraska Medical Center

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