

# To Spank or Not To Spank, Why Is There A Question?

By Kevin R. Fermenick

**Author's Note:** The purpose of this article is to examine the title's topic from the standpoint of God's revealed will. Some political and social debate surrounding this issue is examined to demonstrate how far mankind has drifted from divine wisdom and what a mess we have wandered into being directed by our own wisdom, judgments and emotions.

Many child experts continue to argue against spanking children, both as an effective and appropriate discipline tool. In November, this year, a journal on the development of children published an article on the subject, that renews the debate.

Generally, those against child spanking assert that it causes the child to become aggressive or violent himself. "Violence begets violence" is their cry. Assertions that the child becomes emotionally damaged by spanking are also proffered.

Some even call spanking child abuse, thus criminal conduct that should be treated as such. There are several websites that by their names alone reveal this view. Two examples are [www.neverhitachild.org](http://www.neverhitachild.org) and [www.stophitting.com](http://www.stophitting.com).

At [www.neverhitachild.org](http://www.neverhitachild.org) you will find a link to "Chris's Anti Spanking Web Site." There you can hear an audio file of a child being spanked. The page with the audio file refers to the event as a "minor atrocity" and accuses the mother of "torturing" the child.

On [www.stophitting.com](http://www.stophitting.com), there is a quote ascribed to the late Dr. Benjamin Spock who opined, "*If we are ever to turn toward a kindlier society and a safer world, a revulsion against the physical punishment of children would be a good place to start.*"

On the same website, a Nadine Block has a question and answer page where she encouraged a parent to send her spanked child to a psychologist. Block is a co-founder of the Center for Effective Discipline, and the National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools. The Center for Effective Discipline supports another organization, End All Corporal Punishment of Children (EPOCH) which seeks to effect what its title states by education and legal reform. Dr. Spock was a member of their advisory board. Thirty-two living advisory board members are listed hailing from twenty states and Washington D. C.

They want to ban parents, from spanking their children under penalty of law. They don't prefer that you stop. They want to put you in jail or take your children if you persist in the practice.

In 1979, Sweden banned all forms of corporal punishment believing it would lessen levels of child abuse among its citizens. Other countries have done likewise. Still others are considering it.

When advocates of corporal punishment counter that in many instances it *is* effective, "chicken and egg" arguments are given in response. For example, the question is asked, are spanked children those that misbehave more, or do they misbehave more because they are spanked?

The issue has become so controversial and emotional, as to make reasoned debate all but impossible. God's word and our love for the truth compels us to persevere, anyway.

Opponents of child spanking refer to it as hitting, as when two children are duking it out in the sandbox. Spanking, so the opponents allege, teaches children to hit and we don't want that do we? Opponents also attempt to make an analogy between it and domestic violence (spousal assault). We certainly don't condone the latter, so if we accept the analogy as they assert, then we cannot accept the former either. You may think I am engaging in hyperbole. Think again. Read for yourself their provided information.

Stirring the emotions is obviously a key component to this issue. Spanking opponents want to

paint the spanking proponents as violent Neanderthals that ignorantly and ineptly rear emotionally scarred children. Even when attempting patronizing sympathy, spankers are portrayed as victims of violence themselves (remember, violence begets violence). These parents need counseling so the cycle of violence can be broken. However the issue is approached it is with the end result of eradicating spanking as a viable resource in disciplining children.

One must give credit to the campaigns of spanking opponents. The emotionalism they foster does cloud the reason of many. A fog of doubt ensues that allows sketchy anti-spanking research to seem plausible. Additionally, a political side to this debate exists because certain groups want legislative and judicial prohibitions on the practice.

Even Christians claiming close adherence to Bible teachings have succumbed to the rhetoric. Some brethren have not only chosen not to spank their children, they negatively view their fellow brethren who do. This causes brethren who spank to feel negatively toward the anti-spankers in response. The emotionalism is hard to escape.

However secular research does not support the conclusions of the anti-spankers and God's wisdom does not either. Let us consider both.

Sweden's 1979 ban on corporal punishment of children was in the belief that it would curb child abuse. No such curb occurred. An article by John S. Lyons of the University of Northwestern Medical School and Robert E. Larzelere of the Father Flannigan's Boy's Home, reviewed 1999 research on the results of Sweden's ban<sup>1</sup>. They challenged the research first on technical grounds of how it was poorly and incompletely conducted. Then from available statistics they revealed that child abuse in Sweden had actually increased by almost 500% since the ban! Additionally, they showed that more serious physical abuse occurred in Sweden, after the ban, than in the U. S. during the same time span. There are other interesting items demonstrating that current research does not provide much support at all, much less overwhelming support for the anti-spankers' cause.

Further, as stated at the beginning of the article, the issue of child spanking was revisited by the journal *Child Development*<sup>2</sup>. In this issue they cited research by the article's author who also warned against spanking. Various news sources recently printed excerpts from that article<sup>3</sup> (this *Child Development* has no online version for verification, so my references are from Reuters Health, and Web MD). How these news stories were written is perhaps more revealing than their points taken from the originating journal.

The *Child Development* excerpt cites researcher Jennifer Lansford, PhD, from the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy. She compared cultures where corporal punishment of children was uncommon, such as in Southeast Asia, with cultures where it is very common, as in Kenya. She wanted to see if these cultural differences impacted other research that pointed toward finding physically disciplined children becoming more anxious and aggressive than those not physically disciplined.

Dr. Lansford's research and conclusions are portrayed differently between the two articles. The first sentence of the Reuters article, states that spanked children tend to be more aggressive and anxious than those not spanked, *regardless* of cultural norms. In the Web MD article, the first sentence begins the same but says that the result is *less* common in countries where spanking is the cultural norm.

As one winds through the Reuters article one finds that Lansford research does not support the opening sentence of their article but does support the opening of the Web MD article. Further at the end of the Reuters article, Lansford is quoted as saying, "*Another question is whether physical discipline is appropriate in this day and age, regardless of how accepted it may be.*"

Herein lays a considerable part of the problem with the secular research.

First you have journalists expressing their biases without regard to the supposed facts they are employed to write. Secondly, you have researchers with an apparent outcome already in mind when beginning the research. When the research does not support the desired outcome, then the researcher suggests that we should react as if the research supported it anyway. Really!!! This type of action is not recognized by any research model of which I am aware.

Again, it is the emotionalism of the argument that is driving the issue. This is dangerous, not only in public policy but in the practice of our faith as well. Do not forget that we have brethren that have already been led away by such sophistry.

Let us now consider what God has revealed to us on this subject. I am not looking at His guidance last because I think it the least important part, rather to first show the folly and fallacy of man's wisdom on this issue. Man cannot come to a unified conclusion and even finds himself offering faulty research to "prove" his predetermined conclusions.

Solomon, when he became king, asked God for wisdom and God granted it to him; even to where no man would ever come that was as wise, 1 Kings 3:5-12. It was with this divine gift of wisdom that he wrote most of the proverbs. In the book of Proverbs we find divine wisdom on our topic revealed.

*"He that spareth his rod hateth his son; But he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes."* Proverbs 13:24.

*"Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; (But) the rod of correction shall drive it far from him."* Proverbs 22:15.

*"Withhold not correction from the child; (For) if thou beat him with the rod, he will not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, And shalt deliver his soul from Sheol."* Proverbs 23:13-14.

Lest we dismiss that as outdated and harsh Old Testament teaching, consider New Testament teaching, *"For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, And scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom (his) father chasteneth not? But if ye are without chastening, whereof all have been made partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened (us) as seemed good to them; but he for (our) profit, that (we) may be partakers of his holiness. All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, (even the fruit) of righteousness."* Hebrews 12:6-11.

Admittedly, the scourging and chastening in the Hebrews passage is spiritual in nature and application, nevertheless it is real, because God said it was so and He explained why. To understand this passage, consider the passages in Proverbs. The Bible is in harmony with itself.

Note Proverbs 13:24. Solomon tells us that we hate our children if we refuse to physically discipline them. However if we physically discipline them, we love them.

This is hard for many people, particularly those who have allowed themselves to be hoodwinked by the pseudo-intellectuals presuming to tell us how to raise our children, all the while being unable to agree with themselves as to how we are to accomplish that. But if we slow down and read the Bible with an open heart, not rushing to a hasty and presumptuous judgment, we can know how to successfully raise our children.

Solomon did not say to beat them capriciously or often. He said to chasten them "betimes" or diligently. In other words be consistent in your discipline and don't give up or tire of your responsibility in raising your children. If you love them you will persevere. It is the parent that

does not love their child that refuses to discipline.

How often have you seen children allowed to effectively rear themselves and the end result is a social misfit? They have no respect for authority, earthly or divine. A child left to his own devices, when his reasoning abilities are not fully developed, is not the result of parental love. I must say that as a deputy sheriff, I see the sad results of such laxness, daily.

Solomon says, in Proverbs 22:15, that the “rod” will drive “foolishness” far from the heart of the child. Children, as they begin to mature still cannot reason well themselves, so they mimic surrounding behaviors, sometimes to the chagrin of careless parents. Over time, they think they are reasoning soundly on their own, but it is little more than foolishness. That foolishness becomes dangerous when they become stubborn in their insistence to act out this foolishness. The parent must then take the necessary measures to correct such foolish thinking and acting.

Sometimes the correction must be prompt and firm because of the stakes involved. It is not love to allow your child to do things that may result in his harm or death, because you want him to have a “learning experience. Surely children must experience life, but not everything must be experienced to know that it is harmful and/or sinful.

Let us continue with the rest of what Solomon said and place it all together, in context. In Proverbs 23:13-14, we read that spanking your child will not kill him. In fact spanking your child will deliver him from an early demise. This ties in with my comments above. One other interesting note on this passage, the commentators Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, note the word “Thou” at the beginning of verse 14 as emphatic, thus placing the responsibility on the parent to do their duty. It is terrible to see parents turn over the raising of their children to the state for any number of reasons, most of them rooted in laziness and a lack of love.

Having children is easy. Raising children is long, hard, and initially thankless work. If you do your job correctly, you and your child will disagree, sometimes greatly. It matters not. Your duty to that child remains. You have a duty to raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, Ephesians 6:4. Fathers are specifically mandated to this task.

Children are a blessing from God, *“Lo, children are a heritage of Jehovah; (and) the fruit of the womb is (his) reward. As arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be put to shame, when they speak with their enemies in the gate.”* Psalms 127:3-5. Also, *“Children’s children are the crown of old men; And the glory of children are their fathers.”* Proverbs 17:6

Their souls are as precious as ours. God wants them to become His spiritual children just as He wants us to become such. What judgment do you think fit for parents who have shirked their duties with their child and the child grows up to be rebellious, hating authority, ignorant of God and unwilling to serve Him? We are to, *“Train up a child in the way he should go, And even when he is old he will not depart from it.”* Proverbs 22:6.

Does this mean that we can have perfect children that never fail? Sometimes not. “Good kids” still end up drug addicts, drunkards and they can still end up in jail. We all have free will to choose our path in life.

God recognizes this, He tells us we shall not be responsible for the sins of our sons, nor are they responsible for ours, Ezekiel 18:20. The difference is that when the child is still learning what is right and wrong, and how to live in order to be pleasing to their creator, the parent has a responsibility to raise that child in that knowledge. If he later, as an adult, ignores that knowledge the results are his to bear. However, if you have not carried out your responsibility then you will be held responsible.

I suppose you could say that our children are on loan from God. They (their souls) belong to

Him; we should treat them that way. Recall the teaching of our Lord, “*But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and (that) he should be sunk in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! for it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!*” Matthew 18:6-7.

Reading the Hebrews passage in consideration of the former passages, we can see that even unpleasant chastening is divinely ordained. We can see here the spiritual family reflected in the earthly. I believe that is no accident. God established the physical family to help us know the spiritual family.

Let us make some applications. From the passage in Hebrews we find that God chastens His children. Children that are not chastened are illegitimate children. Think about this for a moment, in the real world, and not some child rearing book that is currently a hot seller.

It is a sad commentary, but true nonetheless, that a man who marries a woman with children is often not as engaged in the raising of those children as if they were his own. This is not universal, but it is not uncommon either. This may sound cold hearted but there is a sense of practical illegitimacy of those children not sired by the man himself. In earlier times where blended families and step-children were the exception rather than the increasing rule, this fact of life was starker and more obvious in its appearance. It also had more unpleasant consequences for those children involved. The book of Hebrews was written in such earlier times. Discipline, as well as the blessing of children was the preserve of a father to *his* beloved children. The lack of disciplining a child was a tacit sign of illegitimacy and absence of love.

On the streets of every city in America such children exist. They are not disciplined in any fashion. When they get into increasing trouble, clearly manifesting a heart of foolishness (cf. Proverbs 22:15) nothing is done. The children grow up not learning the things necessary for their successful participation in society, family relationships and spiritual relationships. When the father is absent, or when none was ever present, the effects of this real or practical illegitimacy is exacerbated.

I cannot begin to tell you the number of times I witnessed a look of shock on a young person’s face that I had just arrested and was taking to jail or juvenile detention. It was sadly obvious that I was the first person who had ever told them “no” and meant it. Yet, I am sure that many of those children’s parents would readily tell you that they loved their child. Solomon said not so. The wisdom God gave Solomon is seen every day.

In the various congregations that I have attended and now preach for, I see similar results. Just because brethren’s children usually don’t become crack heads, or participate in drive-by shootings, or regularly engage in theft, does not mean that the children are being *effectively* disciplined. All too often when the children become eighteen, you see them rapidly drift off into the world. I don’t want to be unkind, nor do I want to insinuate that I was father of the year material, but these children were never nurtured in the chastening and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). Jesus said “*By their fruits ye shall know them.*” Matthew 7:20. That saying is as true for remiss parents as it was for false prophets.

I hear of parents that have decided to not spank their children and the children “turned out fine.” Others would vouch for the parents in their assertion. I don’t doubt them. However, those anecdotes are few and far between, where the assertion is true. Additionally, it is likely more luck than technique, particularly where multiple children are involved. What one hears more often is how one child is good and the sibling is driving everyone else to distraction.

Not every child is the same. Not every discipline technique will work the same on every

child. There is no one “cookie cutter” technique that is the “silver bullet” in child rearing. However, when things get out of control and foolishness reigns in the heart, spanking is an effective tool. Incidentally, most parents who spank will tell you that rather quickly, the number of occasions requiring spanking decrease. When a child learns boundaries and consequences for violation of same, they behave better. Even secular research agrees with this.

Does every child need spanking each and every time they misbehave? No. Some are more tenderhearted than others and a stern word is all that is necessary to correct their behavior. Yet, some are more hard-headed and need a more hands on approach. I know this from my own childhood.

Does this excuse child abuse? Absolutely not! Let’s not, however, redefine child abuse to suit our own think so’s, or succumb to emotionalism. Spanking is to discipline with love for the child’s betterment. The Hebrew writer tells us that “*All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yieldeth **peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, (even the fruit) of righteousness.***” (emphasis mine KRF) Hebrews 12:11. Spanking for any other reason is not what Solomon was talking about. It is not what God has ordained. Angry retribution, or mindless rage is not loving regardless of how it is manifested.

We tread, however, on dangerous ground when we decide on our own to discard a divinely ordained tool in the raising of children. God created us. How can we say we know better how to raise our children than He?

I am not saying that the Bible requires spanking for each offense our children make. What I am saying is that for one to categorically abandon spanking, claiming that it is wrong, and then look askance at their brethren who do spank, that person has strayed far from the safe ground of God’s word. Their arrogance, with respect to their own wisdom as opposed to God’s, may well put a stumblingblock before the feet of their children, causing those children to later fall. Do not forget our Lord’s warning to those who cause such occasions of stumbling.

When we read our Bibles we find that when God’s people obeyed His instruction they prospered. When they disobeyed they failed miserably. So it is in the raising of children.

Dr. Spock or God? You choose.

Endnotes:

1. <http://www.people.biola.edu/faculty/paulp/sweden.html>
2. <http://today.reuters.com/newsArticleSearch.aspx?storyID+237203+21-Nov-2005+RTRS&srch+spanking+and+aggression>
3. <http://webmd.com/content/Article/115/111603.htm>