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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the connection between corporal punishment and child abuse; analyzes the difference between discipline and abuse; and asserts that there are sociological, psychological, and biological characteristics typical of promoters of corporal punishment. (CL)

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CHILD ABUSE IN THE NAME OF DISCIPLINE

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Violence breeds violence. Are we going to allow our children to be taught to abuse their own children? A recent United States Supreme Court ruling allows a teacher to inflict physical discipline or "whip" a child as long as that teacher has another teacher with he or she as a witness. In my opinion there is absolutely no reason why any school teacher should be allowed to whip any child in the name of discipline.

Dr. David Gil, a Sociologist, in 1969 wrote in the American Education Magazine: "A teacher who uses physical force against a child teaches that child and all the children in the classroom that physical force is an appropriate means for human interaction. As such children grow into child abusing parents they are practicing what they were taught in school. Education has developed constructive approaches to motivate children to create challenging, learning milieu and to assure the necessary discipline in the classroom and needs no longer to regress to the destructive approach which is symbolized by corporal punishment."

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There is no doubt that children become what parents make them and children can and often do become what they are taught. There is no doubt that corporal punishment is a form of child abuse that will certainly manifest itself in later years and is likely to have some undesirable side effects on the abused child and on society as well. We have shown our concern for the abused child in the last decade and statistics indicate that the incidence is certainly one for concern. There are tortured and battered children estimated in this country to be over 1 million annually. Nevertheless, there are some who will endorse corporal punishment, a form of child abuse, as a means of discipline. Most psychologists now seem to agree that this type of discipline and other physical punishments teach children to be violent and cause them psychological damage which allows them to view the world as a cold and hostile place with which they must deal with anger and violence.

If there is to be a pattern of child rearing in our culture and there is, it has its roots in our concept of children's rights. It can't be denied that we do slap and whip and strike out at our children in the name of discipline - whether it be in the home, in the school, or in an institution. This striking out at our children is really through irritation rather than in the name of discipline. There isn't any doubt in my mind that our casual acceptance of violence coupled with the concept of parental or public omnipotence is re-

sponsible for the prevalence of corporal punishment and for some child abuse. The rigidly, authoritarian figure who feels justified in demanding an exacting absolute submission for a child and in whipping or beating him until he gets it may be one abusive individual whose actions relate to our child rearing philosophy. Yet it has distorted the normal concepts of discipline and punishment for his own less than normal reasons. The parent or teacher who torments and beats a child in the name of punishment for a minor or non-existent or irrelevant transgression is not, by any stretch of the imagination, punishing a crime. His action is often calculated cruelty, is completely unrelated to discipline and is rooted in his own perverse fascination with the act of abuse. In other words, he enjoys what he is doing.

The parent or teacher or caretaker who succumbs to a momentary fit of rage and lashes out at the child in an uncontrollable and hurtful outburst of hostility is neither disciplining or punishing the child. He knows very well whatever he might say that he has been overwhelmed by anger, impulses that have nothing to do with correcting the child's wrongful actions. This parent or teacher is an uncomfortably familiar person. He comes close to being any individual who has lost control and is involved in a temper tantrum. Many parents and teachers come very close to losing control.

However, they don't whip out, slap out, act out or use violence inflicting physical abuse. Some, however, will slap out in anger, yell, shove, and on occasion, hit a little too hard and then take a deep breath, checking their impulses and perhaps stop before going too far.

There is, I believe, a fairly clear cut difference between what is discipline and what is abuse. The individual who disciplines has in mind the welfare and best interest and safety of the child. The one who abuses is indulging himself. There is also a cut off point, if not precisely defined one, between the exasperation of the normal parent or teacher who occasionally feels himself letting go and then puts on the brakes and the unguarded rage of the abusing parent or teacher. That point is the imposition of control, the act of stopping before the hostile emotion gets out of hand.

Therefore, while there is in our culture a relationship between our child rearing beliefs and the acts of violence against children, it is extremely difficult to accept the possible implication that the deliberate and sometimes ingenious torture inflicted by many abusing child care individuals is a natural extension of the bottom slapping disciplinary practices of non-abusing parents. Parents and teachers who question themselves in their attitudes, aware about their flashes of anger, who do not blame their children for their own abuse, who are concerned about their disciplinary modes and motivations,

who wonder if their instinct to retaliate is normal, who pull themselves short and count to ten before walloping and then restrain themselves instead, are not the abusers.

The promoters of corporal punishment cannot be simply traced to the needs for discipline or teaching the child or to cruelty or to sadistic tendencies or to rage or to mistaken concept of discipline or to a child rearing philosophy or to the presence of violence in our society. I believe they are rooted in the sociological, psychological and even biological characteristics of the offenders.