

Corporal Punishment in Schools

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This statement was developed by Stephen P. Herman, M.D., for the Committee for Rights and Legal Matters¹ of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and it was approved by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in June 1988. It was approved by the APA Assembly of District Branches in November 1988 and by the APA Board of Trustees in March 1989.

Corporal punishment is a method of discipline by which a supervising adult deliberately inflicts pain on a child in response to a child's unacceptable behavior and/or inappropriate language. The immediate aims of such punishment are usually to halt the offense, prevent its recurrence, and set an example for others. The purported long-term goal is to change the child's behavior and to make it more consistent with the adult's expectations. In corporal punishment, the adult usually hits various parts of the child's body with a hand or with a cane, paddle, yardstick, belt, or other object expected to cause pain and fear.

¹The members of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Committee for Rights and Legal Matters were Diane H. Schetky, M.D. (chairperson), John Sikorski, M.D. (cochairperson), Christine Adams, M.D., Elissa Benedek, M.D., Andre Derdeyn, M.D., Arthur Green, M.D., Elisabeth Lassers, M.D., Barry Nurcombe, M.D., Stephen Porter, M.D., and Stephen Herman, M.D. Outside consultants were David Chadwick, M.D., David Lloyd, J.D., Maria Sauzier, M.D., and Sue White, Ph.D.

In the United States, 10 states explicitly bar corporal punishment in their schools: New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, Hawaii, Connecticut, and California. Certain large municipal school districts also prohibit this form of discipline: St. Louis, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Minneapolis. Similar legislation is pending in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Alaska.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry opposes the use of corporal punishment and supports legislation outlawing its use. Research on corporal punishment has shown that it may be harmful. Many other methods of discipline are effective in promoting self-control, eliminating undesirable behaviors, and promoting desired behaviors in children.

Corporal punishment signals to the child that a way to settle interpersonal conflicts is to use physical force and inflict pain. Such children may in turn resort to such behavior themselves. They may also fail to develop trusting, secure relationships with adults and fail to evolve the necessary skills to settle disputes or wield authority in less violent ways. Supervising adults who willfully humiliate children and punish by force and pain are often causing more harm than they prevent.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry opposes the use of corporal punishment in schools and takes issue with laws in some states legalizing such corporal punishment and protecting adults who use it from prosecution for child abuse. The Academy joins with the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the American Medical Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Education Association, the American Bar Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other groups calling for an end to this form of punishment.