

Spanked with Words: More Damaging than We May Realize

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

While conducting therapy with children, I often ask them about their understanding of why their parents discipline them and the kinds of disciplinary practices in which their parents engage. I also attempt to gain their perspective of how justified they consider the disciplinary measures to be and what, if anything, they learn from their parents' actions. Interestingly, when I initiate a discussion about discipline, almost all children respond as if discipline were synonymous with punishment. I might add that their parents respond in a similar fashion. That is understandable since the word discipline typically evokes images of punishing or being punished. Yet, as my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I emphasize in our book *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child*, we believe that one of the most effective and powerful forms of discipline is positive feedback and encouragement. Punishment teaches children what not to do rather than reinforcing what they should do.

Consequences and Spanking

As many of my readers are aware, I am a strong advocate that when children misbehave there should be consequences for their negative actions, although I believe that any punishment should be guided by the use of natural and logical consequences. Such consequences promote responsibility and accountability rather than anger and resentment. Of concern is an issue I addressed in my March, 2001 website article, namely, punishment that is expressed through corporal punishment. In that article I wrote that we must remember that the word discipline stems from the word disciple and is best understood as a teaching process. As a form of education, discipline should not be associated with so-called teaching practices that serve to humiliate, scare, or embarrass children. I emphasized two of the main functions of discipline. One was to ensure a safe and secure environment in which children not only learn the importance of rules, limits, and consequences but they also appreciate the reasons that rules and limits exist.

The second purpose of discipline I highlighted was to develop self-discipline or self-control, a major skill that underlies success in almost all facets of our lives. Self-discipline implies that children have incorporated rules so that even when adults are not

present, they will act in a reflective manner, assuming ownership and responsibility for their behavior. I believe that the emergence of self-discipline is hampered when spanking becomes a major disciplinary tactic. In my workshops some parents have contended that spanking is effective, that it stops behaviors in their children that are unacceptable. That may be true, but in my experience corporal punishment also contributes to children acting out behind our backs and/or becoming increasingly angry.

In my 2001 article I quoted the words of Nancy Samalin, a friend and colleague and a well-known authority on the theme of discipline. In an issue of *Sesame Street Parents Magazine*, Nancy, together with editor Susan Lapinski, wrote an article titled, “The Spanking Report.” They observe, “The child who gets an occasional swat across the bottom when the parents regretfully lose control is not the child most professionals worry about. It’s when spanking becomes a habit that a child—and his family—may be at risk. And spanking is a habit for a majority of American families according to the results of a study of 3,000 adults last summer by pollster Daniel Yankelovich. The study revealed that 61% of the adults who responded condone spanking as a regular form of punishment.”

Nancy and Susan quote Dr. Murray Straus, founder and co-director of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and the author of *Beating the Devil Out of Them*, a book detailing the impact of spanking on children. Straus notes, “In the last three years, we’ve had a revolution in our state of knowledge about spanking and violence. Spanking increases the probability of kids hitting other kids. It often leads to antisocial behavior like cheating and getting into trouble at school. When they grow up, kids who have been spanked are more likely to hit their partners than kids who haven’t.”

Similar to Nancy and Susan, I am not concerned about the child who infrequently receives a swat on the rear end, although I would even like to see that parental response cease. I do not want parents who have ever spanked their child to feel I am unfairly criticizing them; I have discovered many loving parents who at some point have done so. However, I feel it is our responsibility as parents to learn more effective ways of teaching and correcting our children.

I am most troubled by parents who spank their children on a regular basis and/or parents who do not confine a slap to the rear end, but rather hit children with force all over the body, sometimes using an accessory such as a belt. I am of the opinion that in these instances spanking begins to border on child abuse. I know that there are individuals on each side of the spanking argument who would disagree with my perspective. There are those who believe any form of spanking is abusive even if it only involves a quick slap to the child's behind, while others believe that spanking is a parent's right and a proper form of teaching children. My position is aligned much closer to the former group.

Spanked with Words

In many of my workshops for parents I share a story about an elementary school boy (I will call him Jon) whom I saw in therapy. Jon was born with what has been labeled as a "difficult" temperament. His parents often interpreted his impulsivity and struggles in school as behaviors over which he had control and could stop if only he wanted to do so. Although they did not resort to spanking, they were highly critical of his actions, often yelling and demeaning him. Their comments included, "What a stupid thing to do!" "Do you ever use your brains?" "Are you that dumb?" Jon, with tears in his eyes and anguish in his voice, reported to me, "My parents don't spank me with their hands, they spank me with their words."

I had never heard a child describe harsh, demeaning parental comments in this way. I often think of Jon's description, especially when I read recent reports and research about bullying. The adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" has fallen into disrepute. We are now aware of the devastating effect of verbal bullying, including cyber-bullying. We are aware that the well-intentioned advice to just ignore bullies typically does not result in bullies stopping their harassment. We know that bullying is a problem that frequently requires the intervention of adults in order that children feel safe and protected. No child should experience ongoing taunts and humiliation, the effects of which can last for one's entire life.

After Jon used the phrase "they spank me with their words" I asked him if it would be okay for me to share his thoughts and feelings with his parents so that they might begin to appreciate his experience. He reluctantly agreed but wondered if it would

do any good. He even voiced worry that they would become angrier with him if I told them what he had said. However, he gave me permission when I validated his concern and added that I thought it would help. His parents were initially defensive even though I attempted to communicate that I was not here to find fault with them, but rather to have them reflect upon their disciplinary practices and engage in more effective ways of teaching their son. Eventually they recognized that their approach was leading Jon to become increasingly anxious, sad, and resentful and emotionally estranged from them. They were successful in implementing more constructive consequences and becoming more attentive to offering Jon positive feedback when warranted by his behavior. Their relationship with Jon improved significantly.

Words that Scar Young Brains

I was reminded once again of Jon's statement "they spank me with their words" when I recently received a copy of *Focus*, a publication of Harvard Medical School's Office of Public Affairs. I was immediately attracted to a story authored by Elizabeth Dougherty titled, "Cutting Words May Scar Young Brains: Parental Verbal Abuse of Child Appears to Damage Cerebral Pathways." The article detailed research conducted by lead investigator Dr. Martin Teicher, a psychiatrist at McLean Hospital and on the faculty of Harvard Medical School (HMS). I knew Dr. Teicher from the many years I spent on the staff of McLean, including as Director of the Department of Psychology. The article reviewed some startling research findings—findings that support the belief that being "spanked with words" can have a significant impact on a child's development. The research, which involved various assessment tools as well as a neural imaging technology called diffusion tensor magnetic resonance imaging (DTI), was reported in the February 1 issue of *Biological Psychiatry*.

Dougherty writes, "New work from HMS researchers suggests that parental verbal abuse can injure brain pathways, possibly causing depression, anxiety, and problems with language processing." She reports studies conducted by Teicher in 2005, which revealed that "parental verbal abuse has the same negative psychiatric influence as witnessing domestic violence or experiencing extrafamilial sexual abuse. . . . His latest study, which shows that verbal abuse damages specific brain connections, is part of a strategy to isolate different types of abuse, including witnessing domestic violence,

childhood sexual abuse, and harsh corporal punishment, and to examine the specific effects of each on the developing brain.”

Teicher elaborates, “The findings in this study set the stage for what we’re seeing in the other ongoing studies—that sensory systems are vulnerable. The brain is probably suppressing the development of sensory systems that are providing adverse input.”

Dougherty adds, “That is, children’s brains seem to ‘turn down the volume’ on abusive words, images, and even pain. The result is diminished integrity in these sensory pathways.”

One of the other researchers, Dr. Jeewook Choi, a visiting assistant professor of psychiatry from South Korea, offers a thought-provoking statement. “This is the first evidence of the potential deleterious effect of ridicule, humiliation, and disdain on brain connectivity.” Dr. Michael Rohan, a physicist and lecturer in psychiatry at McLean, assisted in interpreting the imaging data. He states, “The fact that early abuse actually shows up in your brain structure late in life is a huge finding. Who knew that it would carry over like that!”

The researchers caution that additional studies are necessary, especially given the relatively small sample involved—16 adults who had experienced chronic parental verbal abuse but no other type of abuse and 16 who had never experienced any form of abuse. Teicher and his colleagues are now attempting to identify “sensitive periods when specific brain structures are most susceptible (to abuse), and, if possible, to find ways to reverse the damage.”

Dougherty concludes, “For now, however, the most important message of this work may be the awareness that parental verbal abuse is damaging.” Teicher adds the sobering observation, “People hear that spanking is bad, so they stop doing that and become more verbally abusive. It turns out, that may be worse.”

Concluding Thoughts

I have often stressed that one of our main roles as parents or caregivers is to be a disciplinarian in the true sense of the word. We must teach our children right from wrong and help them develop self-discipline and self-control. As a parent I know that there are a number of occasions when we become frustrated and angry with our children and can express this anger in ways that are hurtful and humiliating. While I have long been

concerned with physical and verbal discipline that is harsh, the research conducted by Teicher and his colleagues provides what I believe will be increasing evidence of how harmful and longlasting such forms of discipline are, even when conveyed through words. The harm is not only to the emotional life of children but to the actual development of the pathways in their brains.

The research also reinforces my belief that a major challenge of parenting is to learn techniques for setting limits and developing consequences that nurture self-discipline and responsibility in children rather than causing them harm. As we have learned, spanking by hands or spanking by words is a counterproductive way of teaching and works against our children becoming more responsible, thoughtful adults.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>