

Different views on physical discipline:

Toward a cultural understanding

The Elizabeth N. Brehler Scholars Program

“Have you ever been physically abused?”

I had asked this question so often I had stopped thinking about what it meant — its true weight lost in the obligatory repetition. In my first year of the MSW program, I interned at a temporary youth shelter in Detroit, where intake assessments included questions about abuse history.

On this day, the question was posed to a 14-year-old African American girl who had come to the shelter because she had been acting out at home, fighting with her mother and not showing up for school. The teen scrunched her face and darted her eyes to the side. “Um, well, what do you mean by abuse?” Yes, her mother was strict. Impudence was usually met with a hit, a slap or a push. It had happened since she was a child, when she made her mother angry and had to be kept in line. It was discipline. “I mean, I don’t know if I’d call it abuse.”

What did I mean by abuse? I was not prepared for the question, so I fumbled with my papers for a moment before cobbling together what was, in retrospect, a feeble answer. Well, I responded, it would be abuse if it were especially harsh or frequent, or if her mother used objects to hit her. I think this was close to being right; I had never looked up a legal definition of physical abuse. She responded that her mother hit or slapped her a couple times a week if she talked back or didn’t do her chores. Sometimes, it was worse. In a recent incident, she said, her mother had slammed a heavy ceramic African mask into the girl’s knee during an argument, causing her knee to swell and bruise. After probing further, she recounted a troubling history of angry outbursts, and physical and verbal assaults. I informed her I might have to report this behavior in order to keep her safe. At this she grew agitated, her face contorting with worry. She did not want to be removed from her home, or get her mother in trouble. She just wanted things

to get better between her and her mother. For all my personal disgust with her mother's behavior, I understood. But your safety, I told her gently, is the most important thing.

I was shaky as I walked back to my supervisor's office. I had no idea what to do. I did not know if it was abuse, discipline or something else. I was spanked once or twice as a child, but I would never say I had been a physically abused child. Was this just discipline? Or was it something more? A majority of American parents report using some form of corporal punishment in their parenting lives (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). Maybe that was all this situation was – a strict parent disciplining her wayward daughter. As much as I did not want to upset the already tenuous balance in this family, something told me this was more than just discipline. It had happened too often and was usually accompanied by some sort of verbal abuse. But why was I so ambivalent about reporting it? Why did there seem to be so much gray area between physical abuse and physical punishment?

I told my supervisor what the teen had told me, but that I did not know if it warranted a call to Child Protective Services or not. I kept saying I did not want to break up a family, upset the girl ... "Did the mother ever leave a mark on the girl?" my supervisor interrupted. "Yes," I responded, "on at least one occasion a hit left a mark." "Then it's abuse," my supervisor said. I would have to call Child Protective Services and then (per this agency's policy) inform the mother that I had called to make a child welfare complaint. It all comes down to a mark, I thought. The teen's mother did not receive the news calmly. We need to inform you that your daughter described incidents of physical abuse, I told her. It took her a few moments before her voice cracked with anger. "She has never been physically abused, ma'am," she yelled at me. "I'm coming over right now. Will you be there?" I told her I would.

What followed was a nearly two-hour long session that included myself, my supervisor, the teen and her very irate mother. Once her anger cooled, the teen's mother grew teary as she described how she uses beatings to keep her on the right path, to instill respect for her elders. The mother left the agency calmer, but not reconciled with the situation. She removed her daughter from the program only days later. The school year ended before the CPS report was completed, so I never learned the results of the investigation.

But what this incident moved me to do was reconsider my feelings about physical discipline, and how it seems the line between discipline and abuse may be blurred. According to Lansford and Dodge (2008), many who practice physical discipline use non-injurious spanking or slapping that is not accompanied by verbal belittling or threats of severe violence (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). Though I had begun to consider these realities, what this incident really did was force me to confront my feelings about corporal punishment, discipline and my own cultural competence. Personally, I do not agree with physical discipline. As a mother and student of developmental theory, I do not believe in its efficacy or its long-term benefits. I had always believed it could actually have negative effects on children, increasing the risk of emotional problems and aggressive behavior (Gershoff, 2002). It is also true, however, that I am a Caucasian social work student from a middle class background. I did not confront corporal punishment on a regular basis. Sure, I received a swift swap on the rear end when I talked back to my mother, but being slapped, hit or spanked repeatedly? I could not imagine it.

Here is the conflict: I have found non-abusive physical punishment is more accepted in the client population I serve, predominantly lower-income African Americans. According to Vittrup and Holden (2010), exposure to corporal punishment is higher in African American families and

in those within a lower socioeconomic status (Vittrup & Holden, 2010). Most of the youth I worked with at a previous internship reported getting spanked, slapped, even hit on occasion — though it was not considered to have reached the legal threshold of abuse. Moreover, such methods are endorsed by many of my African American classmates and colleagues, some of whom credit it with keeping youth out of trouble, engendering respect for their elders and giving them a sense of how to survive in the world. In my experience, talking about corporal punishment is akin to discussing religion or politics: People’s feelings for or against it are so resolute that any conversation invariably withers into defensiveness and anger. As a result, I am not outspoken in my objection to physical punishment, but it is not something with which I can sympathize when counseling clients. Nevertheless, it is a subject that I believe threatens my beliefs about empathy, beginning where the client is, and having respect for clients’ cultural diversity.

Mosby et al. (1999) found white social workers and their black clients had significantly differing attitudes regarding corporal punishment, with many African American clients defending their preference for physical discipline (Mosby et al., 1999). This may mean many social workers view their African American clients as either abusive (at worst) or lacking in parenting skills (at best). Such confusion may lead to more African American families becoming involved with the child welfare system.

It has been argued that the confusion of African American child rearing techniques with abuse is at least partially responsible for the fact that African American children are grossly overrepresented in the foster care system across the United States (Mosby et al., 1999, p. 489).

If I am to take the above statement to heart, I might have to conclude that social workers who share my beliefs contribute to this problem. Our lack of understanding actually causes the social injustice that we strive so fervently to uphold. I went into social work with the intention of helping the marginalized, the underserved, those who cannot speak for themselves. If I cannot understand my client, how am I to be an appropriate advocate for them?

Perhaps this is the reason I choose to write on this subject. I look at this paper as part of my personal inventory project, a way to put my history, convictions and present reality in a crucible of sorts and see what emerges. I had always assumed I did an adequate job of not imposing my own values on clients or of presuming to know what is best. I believed that my capacity for empathy allowed me to understand both sides to an issue. Finally, I prided myself on the fact that I rose above the relative racial homogeneity of my childhood and was someone without racial prejudices. But this judgment and lack of understanding made me feel like a racist. I was an out-of-touch white girl from the suburbs who did not understand the struggles and experiences of different cultures. I would remember leaving class or my internship feeling hopelessly ineffectual. What could I offer if I'm not able to relate to my clients? I resolved to look for some deeper understanding of the issue that could in turn result in a better understanding of myself.

I started with the literature, the results of which are mixed. Numerous studies have linked regular use of physical punishment to negative outcomes on children's behavior and emotional development (Gershoff, 2002). Taylor et al. (2010) found that even mild forms of corporal punishment resulted in higher levels of aggression in young children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2009) purports that spanking and other forms of physical discipline increase the risk for depression, substance abuse, aggression and criminal behavior (American Academy of

Pediatrics, 2009). There is also some concern that the line between discipline and abuse is too often blurred, leading to excessive corporal punishment to be banned in a dozen states in the country (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). To this I add my own observation, that physical discipline is often a result of a parent's own anger, and not a deliberate act applied soberly with the child's long-term interests in mind. The discharge of one's own intense emotions is not enough justification, in my mind, for corporal punishment.

These beliefs were enhanced, if not directly influenced, by the birth of my first child shortly before I began the MSW program. I never expected my child to be a perfect child who never needed discipline, but I was determined to be a mindful parent, one who thinks before she acts, who reasons before yelling, who attempts understanding before punishment. As most parents would tell you, my naiveté about what to expect from parenting bordered on delusion. It turns out I have fallen short numerous times. I have gotten angry, frustrated and impatient with my child, and the rigors of parenting are many indeed. I do not approach this subject without a palpable understanding of why parents may have the urge to spank their children. The hours are long, the demands are constant, the job difficult.

To this personal reflection I must finally add another factor: old, unresolved issues with my own emotional health unexpectedly emerged during the writing of this paper. I struggled to understand why this issue resonates so deeply within me. I was not punished excessively, nor was I physically or verbally abused. I was surprised to discover how my history of anxiety and depression plays such a significant part in informing my beliefs about this issue. The truth is that even before I became a parent, I would do what I could to keep my child from going through the same pain I did. While I knew having a child evokes new emotions in a parent, I did not know

how jarringly it would awaken old ones. I watch my son move through the early wonders of his world with delight, pride and yes, with a little worry. Without warning, I will look at him and see the little girl I was. There she is, barely into preschool and getting stomachaches and headaches because she was convinced the teacher would get mad at her that day. I see that little girl coughing and choking because her heart was racing so fast that she thought she would die. I can see her ruminating - endlessly counting her steps, the number of times she walks by her bed, the amount of times she brushes her hair. I can also see the looks on the faces of my classmates, teachers and members of my own family, expressions of disbelief, concern, amusement, derision and anger. I was labeled early in my life, and it did not stop. Drama queen, neurotic, crazy, weird, bizarre, dark, strange: These are some of the names people called me before I was even 10. This will not be my son's experience, I thought. I would do what I had to do – I would notice the early signs, I would read the right books, meet such difficulties with patience and empathy. If necessary, I would pay a small fortune for child therapy. And yes, because the research I had read predicted the risks for emotional problems, I would not physically punish my child. In my own way, it came down to what all parents wish for their children, to give them something better than what I had.

As with most any other time in my life, understanding something outside myself has depended on first understanding something inside myself. This personal realization was humbling, but it forced me to consider this issue by listening to what other voices in the research had to say. One of the more interesting findings I discovered showed that in communities where physical punishment is considered culturally normative, its deleterious effects on children are alleviated. According to Taylor et al. (2011), African American mothers showed the most

common reasons they employed corporal punishment was to express love, instill respect and promote child safety, as a last resort, and to promote long-term moral internalization and life lessons (Taylor et al. 2011). One African American mother described it this way: “[Corporal punishment] has worked for us ... I think that different cultures and different races have different ways of disciplining their kids” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 65).

Lansford and Dodge (2008) found that a child’s interpretation of their parents’ discipline strategies depends on the cultural context. They note “within cultural contexts in which the use of physical discipline is normative, children ... may not perceive this discipline as being indicative of their parents’ rejection of them” (Lansford & Dodge, 2008, p. 260). If this is true, the effects of spanking, slapping or other forms of sub-abuse physical discipline would not be as traumatic for children growing up in a cultural community where it is considered common. It seems the more normative it is, the weaker the link between physical discipline and negative outcomes in children (Lansford & Dodge, 2008). The effects may also be tempered by the loving presence of a parent whose discipline is followed by supportive, tender words and gestures (Lansford et al., 2004). Though some researchers posit that the stress of low socioeconomic status and social injustice faced by minority groups is the cause for the acceptance of physical discipline (Vittrup & Holden, 2010), others have differing views. Taylor et al. (2011) cautions social workers that any intervention to reduce the use of corporal punishment must be mindful to start where the community or family is: “With regard to (corporal punishment), it is essential that practitioners realize that many parents value the use of CP for all the right reasons (i.e., to show their children love, teach them respect, promote safety and civility, etc.)” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 70).

Indeed, respecting a culture is to respect the intricate layers of history and mores that inform that culture. Though this may or may not change my own personal beliefs and values, it helps to render what once seemed troubling into a practice rich in context and historical antecedents. The meanings I attach to corporal punishment are not the meanings others, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, may place on it. This is not to say that there are never any instances in which physical discipline is excessive or administered in the wrong context. It is to say that my ability to help clients is not contingent on whether or not I agree with all of their beliefs or even share the same background. It depends only on the fact that I am willing to learn – both about myself and the community I serve. It is easy to regurgitate these values for classes, quizzes or papers. It is another thing to employ them for my own growth as a professional social worker. I will conclude by returning to the image I used earlier of the crucible. The word has two meanings, one of which is a severe test or trial. This sounds a bit hyperbolic when describing my personal dilemma, especially since I believe my profession will include a number of such “tests” in which I will have to employ self-reflection. The literal definition is of a vessel used to heat metals at an extremely high temperature in a way that alters its contents without compromising its structural strength (*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2008). I have come to view this definition as an analogue to the journey we face as social workers. We are continually altering our practices, our notions and our levels of understanding for the benefit of our clients, even as we strengthen the integrity of the personal values and experiences that make us truly unique.

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