

Spare the Rod – and Spare Me the Rest

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Secular parenting should not be motivated primarily by disbelief in God. My religious doubts sprang from thinking for myself, not the other way around. So it's freethought down at the roots of my parenting, not atheism. When someone asks for the foundations of my parenting, I paraphrase the Bertrand Russell quote that begins this book: *Good parenting is inspired by love and guided by knowledge*. Next to the love of my children, my parenting philosophy is motivated primarily by confidence in reason—and there's no reason this should apply any less to discipline and moral development than any other aspect of parenting.

I don't spank my kids. Many religious fundamentalists spank in earnest, convinced it is an essential element of moral development. For support, they often cite the biblical injunction, "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

There's something doubly funny about the invocation of that scripture. First of all, it isn't scripture. Second is its actual source—a raunchy poem by Samuel Butler that skewers the fundamentalists of his time, the English Puritans:

*What med'cine else can cure the fits
Of lovers when they lose their wits?
Love is a boy by poets styl'd;
Then spare the rod, and spoil the child.*

Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, Part II (1664)

He's lampooning the Puritan obsession with sexual abstinence as the cure for passion, using "the rod" in this case as a wickedly clever double entendre while making sly reference to an *actual* passage from Proverbs: "He that spares his rod hates his son: but he that loves him disciplines him promptly" (Proverbs 13:24).

It's amusing to hear sex-averse fundamentalists quoting from a bawdy satire that was aimed at them, and invoking a penis in the bargain. It's almost as much fun as watching my homophobic aunts happily shouting along with the refrain to "YMCA" like it's a song about recreation facilities.

Though most strong advocates of corporal punishment are religious, not all religious people support corporal punishment. Christian child development expert Dr. William Sears strongly opposes the practice. In the process, though, he and other religious progressives have suggested that the rod mentioned frequently in the Bible is a tool meant to guide, not to smite. Though this is true on occasion ("Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me," Psalm 23), in far more cases it's a tool for smiting, beating, whipping, chastening:

- And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod (Exodus 21:20)
- If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod (2 Samuel 7:14)
- Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. (Job 21:9)
- He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.
(Proverbs 13:24)

- Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell. (Proverbs 23:13-14)
- A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back. (Proverbs 26:3)
- For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor. (Isaiah 9:4)
- Rejoice not thou, whole Palestina, because the rod of him that smote thee is broken (Isaiah 14:29)
- I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. (Lamentations 3:1)

So the Bible clearly sees the rod primarily as an instrument of interpersonal violence, including violence against children. These are verses cited by many conservative Christian leaders in their strong advocacy of corporal punishment—advocacy that continues to encourage a practice that should have died out long ago.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic advocate of corporal punishment has been Dr. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family. In his influential book *Dare to Discipline*, Dobson turns parenting into a contest of wills: "You have drawn a line in the dirt, and the child has deliberately flopped his bony little toe across it. Who is going to win? Who has the most courage? Who is in charge here? If you do not conclusively answer these questions for your strong-willed children, they will precipitate other battles designed to ask them again and again" (p. 21). He says "spanking should be of sufficient magnitude to cause genuine tears" (35) and recommends painful squeezing of the trapezius muscle on the neck to obtain "instant obedience" (36). Dobson recommends employing switches and paddles to hit children (64), whipping as

early as 15 months (65), and hitting a toddler whenever he “hits his friends” (66). And if a child cries more than a few minutes after being spanked, he says—hit him some more (70).

But I shouldn’t refrain from spanking just because religious fundamentalists spank—I should refrain because our accumulated knowledge says it’s the wrong thing to do.

Before I go further, let me confess that I spanked my kids in the early going, before I had my parental wings. I had been spanked as a child, and in moments of frustration, I simply and stupidly turned to what I knew. I’m ashamed to admit it. I stopped on a dime when I realized that it represented a serious failure in my parenting—most of all, a twofold failure in my confidence in reason.

Every time a parent raises a hand to a child, that parent is saying *you cannot be reasoned with*. In the process, the child learns that force is an acceptable substitute for reason, and that Mom and Dad have more confidence in the former than in the latter.

I eventually learned to correct behaviors by having them recognize and name the problem themselves. Replace “Don’t pull the dog’s ears” with “Why is pulling the dog’s ears a bad idea?” Very young kids can grapple with that, and you’ve required them to reason, not just to obey. Good practice.

The second failure is equally damning. Spanking doesn’t work. In fact, it makes things worse. The research is compelling. A meta-analysis of 88 corporal punishment studies compiled by Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff at Columbia University found 11 outcomes strongly correlated with corporal punishment. Ten of those were negative, including a damaged parent-child relationship, increased antisocial and aggressive behaviors, and the increased likelihood that the spanked child will physically abuse his or her own children.

The study revealed just one positive correlation: immediate compliance. That's all. So if you need your kids to behave in the moment but don't care much about the rest of the moments in their lives—don't spare the rod! If on the other hand you have a view longer than 30 seconds, make use of the many other techniques that get their attention equally well or better without the terrible long-term legacy of corporal punishment. A discipline plan that is both inspired by love and guided by knowledge finds the most loving option that works, and spanking fails on both counts.

If our ultimate goal is creating autonomous adults, we should raise children who are not merely disciplined but self-disciplined. So if your parenting is grounded in reason, skip the spankings, and teach them to find the reasons to be good. We all have an investment in a future less saddled by aggression, abuse, and all the other antisocial maladies to which spanking is known to contribute.

Discipline and moral development are also related to freethought in a way that might not be obvious. I don't care if my kids end up identifying with religion, so long as it's a choice, not a need. And the best way I can ensure that is by giving them not just knowledge but also confidence and security.

As it turns out, we know how to give them confidence and security—and it's not by beating them. You start with a sensitive, responsive, and consistent home life. Build a strong attachment with parents and other significant adults. Don't hit or humiliate them or let others do so. Encourage them to challenge authority, including your own. Make them comfortable with difference. Use knowledge to drive out fear. Build a sense of curiosity and wonder that will keep them self-educating for life. Let them know that your love and support are unconditional. Teach and expect responsibility and maturity. Encourage self-reliance. Help them find and develop

“flow” activities and lose themselves in them. These are straight out of the best child development research, which strongly supports attachment theory and authoritative parenting.

Just as the best practices for being a humanist are in sync with the best practices for being human, the best practices for humanist parenting are in sync with the best practices for...parenting.