

# Rod rules

Parenting: Anti-spanking crusades have triggered bans around the globe and are taking aim at the U.S.—but some defenders of spanking say that many parents do it unbiblically | Mark Bergin

When Susan Lawrence sent away for a complimentary copy of Home School Digest three years ago, she never expected a life-altering shove toward activism. But an advertisement in the magazine for flexible nylon spanking rods propelled the Massachusetts mother to launch a full-on campaign against corporal punishment.

She founded a website called Parenting in Jesus' Footsteps, encouraging parents to discard the methods of traditional Christian discipline in favor of simply modeling correct behavior. She is convinced that sparing the rod "would make society so much healthier, children happier. Children need to know that they are people, and it's a basic human right to not be hit."

Casting the issue in terms of human rights has prompted the former church music director to seek legislative remedies: Lawrence would never spank her children and believes it should be illegal for others to spank theirs. In countries like Norway, Germany, and Israel, it already is. Laws against spanking exist in 15 nations with two others, Belgium and Italy, close to joining those ranks.

Lawrence is one of many committed activists driven to establish bans on corporal punishment in all 50 states. Her second website, stoptherod.net, sizzles with scathing condemnations of spanking and its effects, mirroring a host of other online campaigns such as stophitting.com, nospank.net, and endallcorporalpunishment.org. In June, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted new standards against corporal punishment, requiring that member nations take immediate legislative action against "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light." The committee declared that spanking is "invariably degrading" and a "form of violence."

That directive cannot bind the United States, which has refrained from adopting the UN definitions of human rights for children and continues to uphold the parental right to spank in every state. But such mounting international fervor is overflowing into U.S. courtrooms and child protection agencies, effectively tightening the standard for legally acceptable discipline.

In December of last year, the South Dakota Supreme Court upheld a determination from the state's Department of Social Services (DSS) that six spanks with a belt, which left no marks or bruises, constituted child abuse and neglect. The undisputed facts of the case, as outlined in the court's decision, reveal that an unnamed 10-year-old girl had stolen a CD from a local Kmart, lied to her parents about breaking the rules of her subsequent grounding, and thrown a fit when asked to clean off the green marker scribbles on the walls and carpet of her room. According to the decision, her mother's spanking, which immediately halted the fit and produced the desired behavior, amounted to abuse and neglect because the "mother did not attempt any other form of discipline before administering the six strikes with a belt."

Such rulings are not new. In a late 1990s case that made national headlines, a Superior Court judge upheld a DSS charge of child abuse against a Massachusetts minister who used the soft end of a belt to discipline his 9-year-old son. The boy testified that the spankings left his skin a pink color "that would last about 10 minutes and then fade." No marks or bruises were ever reported in connection with the discipline, which occurred roughly once or twice a month and was always accompanied by Scripture reading, hugs, and assurances of love.

Nonetheless, the judge agreed that the potential for escalation justified DSS action. Two years later, the Massachusetts Supreme Court unanimously overruled that decision, small vindication for the significant legal and emotional costs. Such prominent court cases, and the accompanying damage to parental authority for the parties involved, leave many parents wary of spanking their children—or at least of admitting it. But recent studies indicate more than half of parents nationwide still use spanking as a form of regular corrective discipline, as many as 90

percent reporting they have done so at least once. An ABC News poll from late 2004 found that 65 percent of Americans approve of spanking—a number reflecting little to no difference in attitudes from 15 years before.

How do Americans spank? Pastor Tedd Tripp, author of the popular Christian parenting manual *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, told WORLD that the problems commonly associated with spanking result not from the practice itself but the improper application of it. Parents often spank in anger or as a means to vent frustration—a direct violation of biblical principles. "Spanking is an expression of love. It's what God does when He disciplines us," he said, citing Hebrews 12:5. "What I'm advocating is a very careful, measured, gracious, and kind use of the rod that restores the child afterwards. The child is not in the doghouse."

Ginger Plowman's practical how-to text, *Don't Make Me Count to Three*, expands that idea, cautioning mothers against the use of spanking as a threat to merely produce good behavior. "It's not just about getting the kids to act right," she says. "We want them to obey and do what's right out of a love for God, not because they might get a spanking. Unfortunately, most people in our country, probably even Christians, are using it in the wrong way."

Despite their condemnation for reactionary beatings, Tripp and Plowman are often lampooned as advocates for violence. Reviews of their books on Amazon.com frequently charge the authors with promoting child abuse, some calling their texts evil, perverted, and worthy of censorship. Hostility toward corporal punishment is even more rampant in Europe, where spanking bans have largely succeeded in altering public opinion. But Tripp reports that many evangelical ministers are encouraging their congregations to defy civil laws and follow the Scriptures: "The pastors that I was with last summer in Europe were all saying to their people, 'We need to wisely, discreetly do what God has called us to do and trust God to protect us and care for us.'"

Wisely, discreetly, perhaps, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has taken a public stance against corporal punishment since 1996, calling it "a less effective strategy than time-out or removal of privileges," but many pediatricians continue to resist the academy's policy statement, believing that responsible spanking outperforms faddish disciplinary approaches.

Many backers of wise spanking do agree with anti-spanking advocates on one thing: Public schools are not the right venue for spanking. In December of last year, Pennsylvania became the 28th state to outlaw spanking in public schools. In most of the other 22 states, the practice is extremely rare—with the exception of several Southern states like Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas.

Most Americans, including Tripp and Plowman, disapprove of public-school paddling and are pleased with its decline. "It's the parent's responsibility," said Plowman.

Tripp agrees, but cautions parents never to spank in public or in view of others who may consider it abuse. "With the trajectory of where we're going as a culture, I'd be very surprised if in 20 years time there are not laws on the books against spanking children," he said.

That prediction is based in part on decisions made in Europe and Canada; Canada's Supreme Court ruled in 2004 that spanking is only permissible for children ages 2 to 12 and never with a belt or other object. Several U.S. municipalities, including Chicago and Brookline, Mass., have already passed resolutions against corporal punishment—though legally such decrees amount to mere recommendations.

The child-abuse statutes in Minnesota carry more legal bite, stating that "if punishment results in less than substantial bodily harm, the person may be sentenced to imprisonment for not more than one year or to payment of a fine of not more than \$3,000, or both." The state definition for bodily harm includes any physical pain, leaving the door open for judges and child-protection workers to accuse parents of abuse for even the most responsible and restrained forms of physical discipline. However, a Minnesota trial court has ruled that such laws do not supersede the common-law right to spank a child.

That amounts to a contradiction, according to Deana A. Pollard, legal professor at Texas Southern University and author of the widely circulated report, "Banning Child Corporal Punishment: A Constitutional Analysis." Pollard, who is at the forefront of the anti-spanking movement, is frustrated by the Minnesota deadlock and overall fledgling struggle to see spanking banned in any state. She has provided expert legal opinion to the Massachusetts legislature in support of House Bill 1787, an act prohibiting corporal punishment of children. But public resistance has stalled the bill, affording little chance for its resurrection in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, Pollard told WORLD that anti-spanking fervor is gathering momentum: "The states that are more progressive—to be blunt, the generally more educated states in the Northwest, the West Coast, and the Northeast—those states are moving toward bans on spanking." Many states now allow judges to consider whether a parent spansks in child-custody cases, with non-spanking parents having an advantage.

Part of what is behind the movement against spanking is a view that children are naturally good and, unless ruined by bad parenting, will naturally build a better world. Dr. Aletha Solter, founder of the Aware Parenting Institute, argues that corporal punishment teaches violence to children otherwise born innocent: "What happens in each home is at the root of world peace. If we're going to be hitting children, they're going to go around wanting to hit and hurt other people. If we raise them with gentle discipline, then we're creating a gentle world."

Often proceeding with that worldview, researchers in psychology departments throughout the country have churned out a steady diet of anti-spanking research. One commonly cited 2002 study published in the weekly journal *Psychological Bulletin* contends that spanking is linked to delinquency and a failure to learn right from wrong. Other popular studies connect spanking to violent behavior or drug abuse later in life.

These researchers do not distinguish between the angry, frustrated spanking that Ted Tripp condemns and the "careful, measured, gracious" discipline that he recommends.

George Holden, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Texas in Austin, told WORLD that the overwhelming majority of researchers in his field consider corporal punishment extremely harmful and of no substantial benefit. "Spanking is a bad practice, and people should stop it," he said. Holden admits that spanking typically yields immediate child compliance in the short term, but he argues that destructive long-term impacts include disrespect and resentment of parents.

Dr. William Coleman, chair of the AAP's committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health, also subscribes to the findings that spanking provokes aggression. He proposes family reeducation: "Most families would not spank if they were a little more supported and informed. . . . Every child's favorite words are no, now, and me. That's normal behavior, but a lot of parents can't understand that, can't accept it."

For many Christian parents, such defiance is not only unacceptable but in critical need of swift and effective correction. The common maxim, "Spare the rod, spoil the child" is a conflation of numerous Proverbs that outline directly the proper method for biblical discipline. One passage states that faithful use of the rod constitutes love while to withhold it is hateful. Another ties spanking to a child's spiritual health. Crucially, the concern is spiritual health, not just a surface obedience. Parents who use the rod unbiblically, in anger, may create problems in their family and in society at large, if biblical discipline is banned.

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