

Spare the Rod: To Spank or Not to Spank? copyright by Nancy Samalin

If there's one discipline method that's sure to inspire heated debate, it's spanking. Indeed, a "spare the rod, spoil the child" mentality seems to be making a comeback. I've even heard some of the parents in my workshops say there's nothing wrong with an occasional swat to "teach kids respect." Many tell me that more benign forms of discipline, such as time-outs, don't work, especially with younger children. That may be true, but I believe spanking is rarely, if ever, an effective alternative.

What follows are the most common excuses I hear to justify hitting or spanking.

1. "I Spank So That My Child Knows What It Feels Like"

Four-year-old Martin was placing the final block on his castle when his baby sister knocked it over. Martin was furious at her for ruining his creation, so he hit her. Their mother, Joan, who had witnessed the scene, was equally furious at the way he had lashed out. As she spanked Martin, she said, "This will teach you not to hit your little sister! Now you know how it feels!"

It's unlikely that Martin felt apologetic after he was spanked. And he certainly was not motivated to get along better with his sister. By spanking Martin, Joan was modeling the very behavior she was trying to prevent, sending him the message that hitting is an acceptable way to solve problems.

A more effective solution would be to firmly state, "Hitting is not allowed in this house. I don't blame you for being mad, but I won't let you hurt her." Joan also might suggest that next time she'll help Martin set up a work area that is out of his sister's reach.

2. "Sometimes I Just Lose It"

It's a rare parent who doesn't lose control on occasion. Many parents, when they're being totally honest, admit that spanking doesn't usually occur in calm, rational moments. But we must make a real effort to handle our anger in other ways.

When you're really enraged, you are at risk of saying or doing something you'd never do if you were feeling rational. That's why it's best to leave the scene until you can regain some self-control. Chances are, once you've had some time to cool down, you won't feel so inclined to inflict pain.

3. "I Only Spank to Reinforce Safety Lessons"

Even parents who don't generally spank say that there are exceptions, especially when the issue is safety. Sandra, for example, described how she spanked her seven-year-old daughter, Sue, when she ran into the middle of the street to chase a ball.

"This was a serious offense and I wanted her to know it. Spanking was the only way to impress upon her that she must look both ways before crossing."

But two weeks later, Sandra was telling a different story: "I thought Sue got my message after I spanked her. But a few days ago, I let her walk to her friend's house across the street by herself. As I watched her from our window, I saw that again she didn't look before crossing."

I suggested that a better approach might be to rehearse each step with Sue: look right, then left, check the right again, and glance around the corner. In the meantime, Sue should not be allowed to cross any street unsupervised until she proves she knows how to be careful.

4. "I Spank So That My Kids Will Know I Mean Business"

I've frequently heard parents express concern that if they don't occasionally spank, their kids will turn out to be wild or spoiled. They argue that they themselves were spanked as children, and they turned out OK. But being a non-spanker doesn't mean being overly permissive. In fact, spanking is the easy way out—for both parents and kids. Hitting a child lets parents release their anger and feel as though they've addressed the problem. However, when a child is spanked, he tends to feel let off the hook. ("I've been punished so I don't have to think about it anymore.") He doesn't learn what to do instead, nor does it help him develop a conscience that makes him feel badly about doing the wrong thing. Even worse, kids quickly figure out that the best way to avoid getting hit is to make sure they don't get caught.

As all of these examples have shown, inflicting pain by hitting, slapping, and spanking does not teach children to look for nonviolent solutions to their problems. What really influences children to do well, to be responsible and considerate, and to develop a conscience is the strong bond they establish with their parents. This bond should be one of love and trust, not one of anger and pain.

Adapted from Nancy's newest book, "Loving Without Spoiling." Order it online (now in paperback):

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