Special Points of Interest:

- 2018 AAP policy now recommends against the use of corporal punishment or abusive language meant to humiliate children.
- This strengthens prior recommendations and adds to the AAP’s call for the end to physical punishment in the schools.
- The policy provides links to further resources that describe effective nonviolent parenting practices; some parents may need more intensive parenting support.
- Although this may be a controversial issue in some parts of the country, the overwhelming public response has been quite supportive.

*Robert Sege, MD, PhD*

The December 2018 issue of the journal *Pediatrics* included a new policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) on effective discipline to raise healthy children (Sege & Siegel, 2018). This policy strengthens prior recommendations about child discipline, which recommended against corporal punishment (AAP, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 1998). The new policy states, “[P]arents, other caregivers, and adults interacting with children and adolescents should not use corporal punishment (including hitting and spanking).” This new recommendation complements the AAP’s longstanding call for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools (AAP, Committee on School Health, 1991).

The AAP policy statement cites an abundance of evidence demonstrating both that corporal punishment is largely ineffective at changing children’s behavior, and that in fact it may be harmful. One analysis of the original 1998 data on adverse childhood experiences suggested that spanking be considered a source of toxic stress that affects brain development (Afifi et al., 2017). A comprehensive review written after the policy statement was published summarizes strong evidence for the harmful effects of corporal punishment (Gershoff et al., 2018).

Of course, the effects of corporal punishment relate to the emotional consequences of being hurt by the parents. Therefore, it is no surprise that parental use of demeaning, humiliating, and degrading language also has
negative consequences for child development. As a consequence, the AAP now advises parents to avoid “verbal abuse that causes shame or humiliation.”

If spanking and humiliation are not recommended, what is? Parents often want and need help in changing problematic normal child behaviors. The policy statement includes references to other resources available for teaching positive parenting strategies, noting that parents “use spanking as a last resort.” The AAP offers online parenting resources (www.healthychildren.org), as does the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (https://www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/index.html). Online or print resources may not be effective for some parents, particularly those involved in the child welfare system, those with mental health issues, or those with a history of trauma. Evidence-based primary care interventions that integrate social workers (Dubowitz, 2014) or other mental health professionals (www.healthysteps.org) may be able to help parents learn effective parenting strategies. Communities throughout the United States offer family resource centers.

When we developed this policy, we suspected that there would be a great deal of controversy generated. After all, spanking is still a common disciplinary practice in the United States. This fear persisted despite recent surveys showing that the acceptance of corporal punishment in the United States has been dropping. Imagine our surprise when the overwhelming response to this well-publicized policy statement has been positive. We saw many comments from adults who told about their lifelong difficulties in relating to their parents who had spanked them. On radio call-in shows, in op-eds published throughout the country, and in casual conversation, this policy appears to be well-known and widely accepted. Perhaps the increased awareness of domestic violence over the 20 years since the prior policy was issued has changed the national discussion: as a society, we no longer accept violence within our closest family relationships.

There are of course several cautions. Parents make their choices about how to raise their children; all we can do is offer information and advice. In doing so, there is a context of cultural differences in the acceptance of corporal punishment across the United States. Anecdotal, corporal punishment seems to be more widely accepted in the southeast than in other regions. There is a wide belief that black Americans spank their children more often than white ones do, although recent surveys failed to show any significant difference (Sege et al., 2017). The only way to find out a person’s beliefs and attitudes about corporal punishment is to ask. Parents of similar backgrounds may have strikingly different beliefs.

Cultural differences are of particular concern because our child welfare system is widely understood to suffer from racial bias. Suggestions that spanking children is equivalent to child abuse might reasonably be expected to raise concern about further widening any existing race-based inequities in child protection. As child abuse professionals, we can and should push for a change in social norms that will eliminate corporal punishment from the experience of today’s and tomorrow’s children. In doing so, we follow the lead of parents across the country who are already looking for other ways to raise healthy children without injecting violence and fear into the sacred bond between parent and child.

References

News From APSAC

Exciting Updates to our Forensic Interviewing Clinics!

APSA is thrilled to announce that we will be offering three forensic interviewing clinics in 2019. In addition to our dynamic 40-hour training, we will hold two two-day advanced clinics focused on enhancing the skills of experienced forensic interviewers. Training details:

- June 18-19, 2019 – Two-day advanced clinic as part of the 2019 Colloquium – Salt Lake City, UT – Registration open
- August 26-30, 2019 – 40-hour clinic – Seattle, WA – Registration open
- December 11-12, 2019 – Two-day advanced clinic – New Orleans, LA – Registration coming soon!

Visit the APSAC website for more details!

From the National Initiative to End Corporal Punishment

The National Initiative to End Corporal Punishment co-sponsored by the New York Foundling, APSAC and the U.S. Alliance to End the Hitting of Children, is engaged in several activities to end corporal punishment in the United States. The National Initiative to End Corporal Punishment has engaged PCI Media, a communications agency to develop a social media strategic plan. The U.S. Alliance to End the Hitting of Children has launched its' Ambassador Drive serving as a fundraising tool and asking for a show of support for the cause. The National Initiative to End Corporal Punishment is supporting and encouraging the adoption of No Hit Zones in organizations and public spaces and is developing and identifying resources for professionals and parents to help educate and inform them about the negative consequences of the use of corporal punishment and alternative positive parenting practices.
Robert Sege, MD, PhD

Robert Sege, MD, PhD, is Professor of Medicine and Pediatrics at Tufts University School of Medicine. He is nationally known for developing health systems approaches to preventing child abuse and neglect by better supporting families. He is Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington and serves on the boards of the Massachusetts Children’s Trust and Prevent Child Abuse America. Dr. Sege has served on the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect. He is a graduate of Yale College, received his PhD from MIT and his MD from Harvard Medical School. Bob lives in the Boston area, where he and his wife have raised three young adult children.

The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children is the leading national organization supporting professionals who serve children and families affected by child maltreatment and violence. As a multi-disciplinary group of professionals, APSAC achieves its mission in a number of ways, most notably through expert training and education activities, policy leadership and collaboration, and consultation that emphasizes theoretically sound, evidence-based principles. If you found this article valuable and would like access to all of APSAC’s publications, resources, and training discounts, please consider becoming a member. Learn more about becoming a member at apsac.org/membership.