

or less doomed to ineffectuality. In Texas alone, according to the Project NoSpank Web site ([www.nospank.net](http://www.nospank.net)), some 118,000 children are punished this way each year.

Many teachers cannot imagine a school system entirely free of such punishment. They themselves grew up in an atmosphere of violence, so they learned very early to believe in the effectiveness of punitive measures. Neither in their own childhood nor during their teacher training were they given the chance to develop a sensitivity to the sufferings of children. Thus, they have little awareness that in the long run, using physical force against children merely teaches them to behave aggressively later in life.

Children with a background of violence have learned to devote all their attention to averting danger. So they will hardly be able to concentrate on what they are being taught at school. They may well expend most of their energies on observing the teacher so as to be prepared for the physical "correction" that they feel to be inevitable. If it does come, it will reinforce their view. On the other hand, a teacher who understands these children's fears might move mountains — provided, again, that the abused child's reality is never played down.

We come across the same phenomenon in politics. As long as we are unaware of the degree to which the right to human dignity was denied us in childhood, it will not be easy to concede that right to our own children, however sincerely we may want to do so. Frequently we believe we are acting in the interests of the children and fail to realize we may be doing the very opposite, simply because we have learned to be callous in this respect at such an early stage. The effects of that learning are stronger than all the things we may learn later.

We can see an illustration of this in present-day legislation. As of September 2000, the German parliament has expressly denied natural parents the right to physical correction. As recently as 1997, they were still entitled to that questionable privilege; it was denied only to non-blood relatives and other caregivers. The overwhelming majority (80 percent) of German parliamentarians were convinced at the time that in certain cases corporal punishment at the hands of the natural parents could have a salutary effect. This opinion is still shared by most legislators, as recent decisions in Britain show. The persistent argument was that physical force should not be prohibited because it prepares children for life's dangers and thus helps them learn to protect themselves.

But beaten children are not learning how to defend themselves against criminals. They are learning to fear their parents, to play down their own pain, and to feel guilty. Being subjected to physical attacks that they are unable to fend off merely instills in children a gut feeling that they do not deserve protection or respect. This perniciously false message is stored in their bodies and will influence their view of the world and their attitude toward their own children. They will be unable to defend their claim to human dignity, unable to recognize physical pain as a danger signal and act accordingly. Their immune systems may even be affected. In the absence of other persons on whom to

model their behavior, these children will see the language of violence and hypocrisy as the only effective means of communication. Naturally, they will avail themselves of that language when they grow up because adults normally suppress feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. This is the real reason why so many defend the old system of parenting and schooling. Until now only 17 of 192 members of the United Nations Organization had made spanking children illegal. This shows how little this problem is recognized world-wide.

In Cameroon, an organization named EMIDA (*Elimination de la maltraitance infantile domestique africaine*) reports that it has statistical evidence suggesting that 218 million children in Africa are regularly subjected to physical "correction." When I inquired about the reasons for such a high incidence of maltreatment, I was told it is a common myth that the brain functions better when children are beaten until they bleed. It is understandable that when they reach adulthood, children brought up in such a tradition will adhere to this system so as to avoid confronting their repressed early suffering. But the consequences of such repression are all too apparent in the bloody clashes between the peoples of Africa. All kinds of reasons are advanced to explain these conflicts, but the most plausible one is the pent-up rage of the beaten child thirsting for release and vengeance.

Though children in all African schools are cruelly beaten (in a survey conducted by EMIDA in 2000, only twenty out of more than two thousand children responding said that they were never beaten at home or at school), the methods used on infants are the ones that are of decisive importance. The earlier the use of violence starts, the more profoundly the lesson is internalized and the less accessible it is to later control by the conscious mind. Thus, the first opportunity, in the form of some kind of political ideology, will suffice to spark off bestial cruelty in quiet, servile people who were living with explosive suppressed aggression.

For those acts of vengeance, society provides a whole range of ideological guises. Racism, anti-Semitism, fundamentalist fanaticism, and "ethnic cleansing" are only some of them. Many young people engaged in such activities strongly believe that they are serving idealistic aims.

POSTSCRIPT: Many survivors of corporal punishment in childhood write to the mail-box of [www.alice-miller.com](http://www.alice-miller.com) and report how deeply this mistreatment ruined their lives, their self-esteem and their parental skills. Nevertheless, they still blame themselves for the beatings they got (because they were so nasty). They receive from Alice Miller or her team information that helps them to overcome the lingering effects of extreme cruelty that they had to endure in the most tender time of their lives. Now, instead of repeating unconsciously the abuse on their children, they begin to feel and understand the suffering of the small child they once were and become conscious and caring parents.

# CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND POLITICAL MISSIONS

By Alice Miller April 2007

"As long as the child will be trained not by love, but by fear, so long will humanity live not by justice, but by force. As long as the child will be ruled by the educator's threat and by the father's rod, so long will mankind be dominated by the policeman's club, by fear of jail, and by panic of invasion by armies and navies."  
— **Boris Sidis**, from "A lecture on the abuse of the fear instinct in early education" in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 1919.

Under certain circumstances, children who have been told repeatedly that the humiliations and beatings they have been subjected to are for their own good may end up believing it all their lives. Consequently, they will raise their own children in the same way, laboring under the delusion that they are doing the right thing. But what happens to all the rage, the pain, the anger those children were forced to suppress when they were not only treated cruelly by their own parents but expected to be grateful for it?

Tackling this question has helped me get nearer to answering the first of the questions I asked about childhood: How does evil come into the world? Gradually, the conviction took shape in my mind that evil is reproduced with each new generation. Newborn infants are innocent. Whatever predispositions they may have, they feel no urge or need to destroy life. They want to be looked after and protected, to love and be loved. If those needs are not satisfied, if children are abused instead of cherished, then that will determine the entire course of their lives. Human beings feel the urge to be destructive only if they were subjected to cruelty at the beginning of their own lives. A child who has been loved and respected will have no motivation to wage war on others. Evil is not an inevitable or integral part of human nature.

Although these insights seemed logical and consistent to me, I still had my doubts because hardly anyone seemed to agree with me. To prove to myself that my convictions were true, I turned my attention to the life of Adolf Hitler. I thought that if I could show that this monstrous mass murderer was made into what he was by his parents, it would be the end of the traditional idea that some people are just “born bad.” I described Hitler’s childhood in my book *For Your Own Good*, and many of my readers were aghast. One woman wrote: “If Hitler had had five sons he could have vented his revenge on for the tortures he was subjected to in his childhood, then he would probably never have victimized the Jewish people. You can take everything you’ve suffered out on your own children and never get punished because murdering the soul of your own child can always be passed off as parenting, child-raising, upbringing.” In *Paths of Life* (pp. 158-161), I elaborated on the childhood roots of Hitler’s hatreds:

We know that as a boy Hitler was tormented, humiliated, and mocked by his father, without his mother being able to protect him. We also know that he denied his true feelings toward his father. . . . This hatred remained repressed because hating one’s father was strictly prohibited, and because it was in the interests of the child’s self-preservation to maintain the illusion of having a good father. Only in the form of a deflection onto others was hatred permitted, and then it could flow freely.

Hitler’s specific problems with the Jews can in fact be traced back to the period before his birth. In her youth, his paternal grandmother had been employed in a Jewish merchant’s household in Graz. After her return home to the Austrian village of Braunau, she gave birth to a son, Alois, later to become Hitler’s father, and received child-

support payments from the family in Graz for fourteen years. This story, which is recounted in many biographies of Hitler, represented a dilemma for the Hitler family. They had an interest in denying that the young woman had been left with child either by the Jewish merchant or his son. On the other hand, it was impossible to assert that a Jew would pay alimony for so long without good reason. Such generosity on the part of a Jew would have been inconceivable for the inhabitants of an Austrian village...

For Alois Hitler, the suspicion that he might be of Jewish descent was insufferable in the context of the anti-Jewish environment he grew up in. . . . The only thing he could do with impunity was to take out this rage on his son Adolf. According to the reports of his daughter Angela, he beat his son mercilessly every day. In an attempt to exorcise his childhood fears, his son nurtured the maniac delusion that it was up to him to free not only himself of Jewish blood but also all Germany and later the whole world. Right up to his death in the bunker, Hitler remained a victim of this delusion because all his life his fear of his half-Jewish father had remained locked in his unconscious mind.

Jews were not the only target of Hitler’s rage and fear. He was also frightened by the chaotic behavior of his schizophrenic aunt, Johanna, who lived with the family:

As an adult, Hitler ordered every handicapped and psychotic person to be killed, to free the German society from this burden. Germany seemed for him to symbolize the innocent child who had to be saved. Besides his fears in connection with his father and aunt, there was his early relationship with his very intimidated mother, who lived in constant fear of her husband’s violent outbursts and beatings.

These irrational fears — which an outsider watching his speeches on video can easily recognize — remained unrecognized and unconscious to Hitler until the end of his life. Stored up in his body, they drove him constantly to new destructive actions in his endless attempt to find resolution.

Those who claim that Hitler and his helpers were born with sadistic genes — and there are still many who think and even write this nonsense — should be able to answer the question why so many millions of Germans were born with these defective genes exactly 30 years before the Third Reich, making them willing executors for a mad dictator, and why Germans of today show no such genetic heritage. To me, the only reason for the Holocaust at that time was the brutal upbringing to which German children were subjected during the first years of the 20th Century. It was an upbringing calculated to produce blind obedience. (I documented this thesis in the essay on the “Roots of Hatred” in my book, *Paths of Life*, Pantheon).

Not all my readers were able to accept this view of Hitler and concede that his terrifying example demonstrates how evil comes about, how tiny, innocent children can turn into ravening beasts threatening not only their own families but the whole world. I was reminded that many children get beaten and otherwise abused in childhood, but they do not all turn into

mass murderers. I took these arguments seriously and investigated the question of how children can survive brutal treatment without becoming criminals later in life. From a close study of many biographies, I established that in those cases where the victim did not turn into a victimizer, there was invariably some figure that had shown the child affection, the person I call the helping witness. Children with helping witnesses to turn to were able to gain awareness of the evil that had been done to them while at the same time identifying with the person who had shown them kindness. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky is one well-known example. Though he probably suffered at the hands of his brutal father, he was given solace by his loving mother.

Children with no helping witness are in the greatest danger of regarding the dreadful things they have been subjected to as for their own good and then dealing out to others the same kind of treatment without the slightest pangs of conscience. In short, they will ideologize this hypocrisy. Hitler the child learned at home that blows and humiliations were right and proper. Hitler the adult insisted — and believed — that it was his calling to save Germany by exterminating the Jews. Other dictators have ideologized their acts of vengeance in similar ways. Stalin *had to* purge Russia of the subversive “cosmopolitans”; Napoleon *had to* establish the *Grande Nation*, cost what it might; Milosevic *had to* make Serbia into a great nation.

Society’s blindness to these mechanisms is what still makes was possible, *because the actual reasons behind them remain in the dark*. Although probably all historians, at least in Germany, know very well that Frederick the Great was humiliated and tormented by his father, I have yet to come across a historical work that makes the connection between the cruelty meted out to this sensitive child and the monarch’s later compulsive urge to overthrow as many countries as he could. Obviously this subject is still taboo.

For as long as we have recorded memory, the same woeful picture has been repeating itself. Men go off to war, women cheer them as they leave, and very few question what really sparked it off. Wars patently designed to invade and conquer foreign territory are passed off as acts of self-defense, or as the fulfillment of some holy mission. Most people are blind to the genuine reasons behind these “missions.” Only when we have understood where evil comes from and how we keep it alive in our children will we cease to be helplessly exposed to its effects. We have a long way to go.

In nearly half of the fifty states in the United States, teachers are still allowed to spank children in school. This punishment is given for minor offenses, usually in the form of paddling on the buttocks performed by a person specially designated to do so. There is a graded scale of different forms of corporal punishment aimed at meting out “discipline.” Pupils are made to stand in a corridor awaiting their turn to be chastised. These children appear to consider this institutionalized humiliation as something normal. Only later will their pent-up feelings of rage be vented in acts of criminal aggression. Most parents tolerate this system; some actively endorse it. Isolated mothers and fathers who oppose it are more