

The worst of all bad habits

“Corporal punishment” is a dignified term for a practice which is anything but dignified. Translated into plain language, it means “punishing the body,” and, as it applies to schools, usually means battering a child’s buttocks with a flat stick or board. It should be understood that hitting a child — or “paddling,” as it is typically called — is not the only method for inflicting pain. Forced exercise, denial of use of the bathroom, for instance, are commonplace. But paddling, because it is specifically allowed and so blatant, serves as a smokescreen for a wide variety of less obvious forms of violence. These practices are rationalized as being in the children’s best interests and essential to the smooth functioning of the school. Were that true, schools that are the most punitive would be the highest performing, children who are routinely punished would be the best behaved, and every teachers’ college would teach paddling. In fact, school systems with the highest rates of corporal punishment are the worst performing, children who are the most punished are the most troubled and difficult to manage, and there is not one accredited teachers’ college in the United States that instructs undergraduates in the proper method for hitting children.

There is one aspect of corporal punishment which is rarely mentioned, but should be: its sexual side. Some people experience a profound psychological need to dominate a defenseless victim, including the need to inflict terror and pain by beating. This compulsion probably has its origin in their own early experience of cruelty at some critical stage of their development.

Such people have been known to seek employment in paddling schools because those places give them free rein to indulge this perverse appetite. In an apparent attempt to

guard against such impropriety, many schools require that paddling be done in the presence of a witness. But no one has ever explained what the witness is supposed to be witnessing or preventing, and there is nothing to prevent the paddler and the witness from being accomplices in an act of sexual battery. Team paddling only protects the adult perpetrators and their employer, not the child.

For the child, who is a non-consenting, unequal party in the act, stimulation of the buttocks, painful or otherwise, is also sexual. It’s a felony when done to an unwilling adult.

In light of these dangers, why is corporal punishment of children legal? Why is it even applauded and encouraged in some circles? The answer isn’t complicated.

People who hit children find affirmation in the fact that many others do it, too. After all, they reason, if *everyone*, including teachers, is doing it, what can be so wrong? This mutual reinforcement among child abusers calms doubts and assuages troubled consciences. One hand washes the other. In a community rife with cruelty toward children, few dare to be the first to appear out of step, and whistleblowers pay dearly, professionally and socially.

I’m not sure what it will take to rid society of this worst of all bad habits, or when it will happen. But I am hopeful that you, dear reader, now that you know the facts, will do your part to protect children.

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