

The Origin and True Purpose of the Paddle



Illustration:
Anti-slavery Office,
Boston, 1845

Common mode of whipping with the paddle

The child which has been whipped into obedience is a pitiful object

There has probably never been an evil of any description for which it was not possible to dig up some argument in its favour, some excuse for its continued existence. The justification for the existence or extension of a practice lies not in the fact that it possesses certain virtues, but that those virtues outweigh its drawbacks, or that it serves society in some essential form for which there is no alternative method available. By no species of argument can anything of this nature be claimed for corporal punishment. Its evils, its drawbacks, and its disadvantages, as we have seen in the process of our inquiry, outweigh hugely and in every possible way, its few virtues — virtues which are based upon the most dubious foundations.

The true fundament of any value which corporal punishment possesses as a preventive of crime is the fear which it instills in the culprit— actual or potential. Now fear is a powerful deterrent. It operates in the child, and in the adult, in the most primitive of races and in the highest stratum of civilized society. But there are many kinds of fear. Fear of death is a necessary and valuable preventive of injury and suffering. Fear of displeasing one's parents is an admirable trait in the child. Fear of alienating public opinion, and fear of losing one's liberty or one's social position, are powerful antidotes to sin and crime in adult society. But the fear induced by corporal punishment belongs primarily to none of these categories. It is essentially and pre-eminently the fear of physical pain. It is the fear inevitably associated with suffering of a degrading, deliberate and debasing nature. Fear which is associated with and restricted to physical pain, as a punitive factor, possesses no true reformatory power...

The individual, whether child or adult, who can be kept good or moral through fear or personal suffering only, is a pitiful creature. His reformation, or his good conduct, is purchased at a price which is as terrible as it is deplorable. His existence is that of a slave...

Human ingenuity gets over most difficulties... And human ingenuity is not necessarily devoted to just or humane ends. It is just as often directed to cruel, disgraceful, revolting and disgusting purposes. With the slave-owners it was directed to the finding of a method of punishing the negroes without affecting adversely their market value. It was to an enterprising Virginian "white" that came the big idea whereby it was possible to "whip" or beat a negro into insensibility without leaving any traces of the owner's handiwork. To this end, he devised a thin wooden 'paddle' punctured all over its flat surface with small holes. With this instrument, so it was said, a slave could be given such terrible punishment that he lost consciousness, and yet no lacerations, fissures, or other signs of punishment having been inflicted, would result...

George Ryley Scott

From *The History of Corporal Punishment*, 1938

Beating in child-rearing has its psychological roots in slavery

The black parent approaches the teacher with the great respect due a person of learning. The soaring expectations which are an important part of the parent's feelings find substance in the person of the teacher. Here is the person who can do for this precious child all the wonderful things a loving parent cannot. The child is admonished to obey the teacher as he would his parents and the teacher is urged to exercise parental prerogatives, including beating. In this the parent yields up his final unique responsibility, the protection of his child against another's aggression. The child is placed in the teacher's hands to do with as she sees fit, with the sole requirement that she teach him. The Meaning of this gift is not lost on the teacher, who is alternately touched by the parent's trust and staggered by the responsibility, for the teacher knows best of all that much has gone on before she gets the child and knows that, even as the parent urges her not to spare the rod, that same parent is telling volumes about the life that child has led up to this moment. The parent tells of a child both beloved and beaten, of a child taught to look for pain from even those who cherish him most, of a child who has come to feel that beatings are right and proper for him, and of a child whose view of the world, however gently it persuades him to act toward others, decrees for him that he is to be driven by the infliction of pain. Pity that child.

Beating in child-rearing actually has its psychological roots in slavery and even yet black parents will feel that, just as they have suffered beatings as children, so it is right that their children be so treated. This kind of physical subjugation of the weak forges early in the mind of the child a link with the past and, as he learns the details of history, with slavery per se.

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