



Corporal Punishment Does Not Belong in Public Schools

Nineteen states continue to allow school corporal punishment as a form of discipline. This is despite clear and compelling evidence that corporal punishment causes both physical and psychological injury, is ineffective in promoting positive student behavior, interferes with student learning, is used disproportionately with some groups of students more than others, and creates a negative school climate. Students must be safe and free from physical and emotional harm in schools. A supportive school environment is critical for effective teaching and learning.

KEY FINDINGS

- **School corporal punishment—defined as school personnel striking a child, typically on their behind and often with an object—is still experienced by large numbers of public school children.** A total of 68,286 public school children were subject to corporal punishment in the 2017-2018 school year. Some children were punished physically more than once; thus, there were a total of 96,555 instances of corporal punishment in that school year.¹
- **School corporal punishment causes injury.** Corporal punishment in public schools is typically delivered using “paddles”, which are wooden boards that are typically 2 feet long, 3 inches wide, and a half inch thick.² The use of implements such as paddles means that school corporal punishment often results in physical injuries to children, including bruises, cuts, welts, and even broken bones.³ In one study, nearly one in four adolescents who had received school corporal punishment reported that they suffered a bruise or other injury from the punishment.⁴ *If an adult were to hit another adult with such a board, the act would be considered assault and the board would be considered a weapon.*
- **School corporal punishment causes trauma.** Children who experience school corporal punishment report feeling angry, embarrassed, and afraid.⁴ Witnessing or hearing corporal punishment of other students can also be traumatic for children, such as when children are punished at the front of the class or when their cries are broadcast over a public address system from the principal’s office.
- **Corporal punishment is ineffective.** Several decades of research have demonstrated that corporal punishment is not effective at improving children’s behavior; rather, children become more aggressive and disruptive over time the more frequently they experience corporal punishment.⁵

- **Corporal punishment interferes with learning.** Children who experience school corporal punishment perform less well on achievement tests than their peers and have lower high school GPAs.^{4,6}
- **Black students are more likely to experience corporal punishment than their peers.** Although they constitute only 15% of the population of public school students in the U.S., Black students make up 37% of the students subject to school corporal punishment.¹ This is clear evidence of racial inequity: Black students are 2.5 times more likely to be among students getting corporal punished than we would expect based on their percentage of the student population.
- **Boys are singled out for corporal punishment at a much higher rate than girls.** Boys and girls are roughly equal percentages of the national public school population (51% vs 49%), yet 81% of students subject to school corporal punishment are boys.¹
- **Corporal punishment is being used disproportionately against schools' most vulnerable students—children with disabilities.** Although some states have restricted the use of school corporal punishment against children with disabilities in recent years (e.g., Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee), children with disabilities make up 21% of all instances of corporal punishment, even though they are only 17% of the student population.¹
- **The vast majority of schools in the U.S. have chosen not to use corporal punishment.** The good news is that principals and administrators throughout the country have realized that corporal punishment is an antiquated and ineffective practice that has no place in public schools. Even among the 19 states that allow corporal punishment, fully 91% of public schools chose not to use corporal punishment in the 2017-2018 school year.¹ However, far too many schools still use corporal punishment: 3,977 public schools reported corporal punishment in 2017-2018.
- **Schools throughout the country are successfully maintaining school discipline through positive and non-punitive methods.** Rigorous evaluations have established that the school-wide approach to improving school climate known as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is effective at promoting student achievement, improving attendance, increasing prosocial student behavior, and enhancing mental health.⁷
- **The COVID-19 pandemic has elucidated the critical importance of supportive school environments for effective teaching and learning.** The pandemic has upended the lives of students and their families across the country, leading to increased social isolation, anxiety, stress, and trauma.^{8,9} Such stress and trauma may manifest in initial challenging behaviors when children do not know how to ask for help. School personnel can play a crucial role in supporting children in time of crisis, but only if children trust that their schools are safe environments that will protect them from additional trauma.

Recommendations

The American Psychological Association (APA) was the first professional organization to call for an end to school corporal punishment in 1975.¹⁰ APA continues to call for an end to the corporal punishment of children in America's schools.

- **Congress should enact legislation to eliminate corporal punishment from public schools.** APA supports the *Protecting Our Students in Schools Act*, which will require states to end the practice of school corporal punishment in order to receive federal education funding.
- **School districts should implement discipline policies that emphasize positive discipline methods.** Schools throughout the country currently use positive discipline methods, such as PBIS, that both promote school climate and provide effective and non-aversive guidance to students. It is incumbent on all states, districts, schools and educators to foster positive school climates and improve discipline practices through evidence-based training, ongoing professional development for educators, and greater involvement of school support staff. In contrast to punishments that focus on what not to do, positive disciplinary methods that focus on teaching students positive expectations for behavior and recognizing when students engage in these behaviors have been shown to be more effective in promoting appropriate behavior and academic achievement.⁷

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- 3 Gershoff, E. T., Purtell, K. M., & Holas, I. (2015). Corporal punishment in U.S. public schools: Legal precedents, current practices, and future policy. *Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice* (pp. 1-105). doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-14818-2
- 4 Gershoff, E. T., Sattler, K. M. P., & Holden, G. W. (2019). School corporal punishment and its associations with achievement and adjustment. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 63*, 1-8. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2019.05.004
- 5 Gershoff, E. T., Goodman, G. S., Miller-Perrin, C., Holden, G. W., Jackson, Y., & Kazdin, A. (2018). The strength of the evidence against physical punishment of children and its implications for parents, psychologists, and policymakers. *American Psychologist, 73*, 626-638. doi: 10.1037/amp0000327
- 6 Ogando Portela, M.J., & Pells, K. (2015). *Corporal Punishment in Schools: Longitudinal Evidence from Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam (Innocenti Discussion Paper No. 2015-02)*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/CORPORAL%20PUNISHMENT%20IDP2finalrev.pdf>
- 7 Center on PBIS. (March, 2021). *Why prioritize behavior support?* Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. Retrieved from: <https://www.pbis.org/resource/why-prioritize-behavior-support>
- 8 American Psychological Association. (2021). Stress in America 2021: One year later, a new wave of pandemic health concerns. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/sia-pandemic-report.pdf>
- 9 Kidman, R., Margolis, R., Smith-Greenaway, E., & Verdery, A.M. (2021). Estimates and Projections of COVID-19 and Parental Death in the US. *JAMA Pediatrics*. Published online April 05, 2021. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0161
- 10 American Psychological Association. (1975). Corporal punishment. Council policy manual. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/index.aspx>.