

To spank or not to spank ... what is the answer?

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

Spanking. There might now be another parenting topic that has stronger emotions surrounding it. The first thing I had to figure out – what exactly is spanking?

The term “spanking” has a myriad of definitions, from an open hand swat to the buttocks or extremity to open-handed hits to other parts of a child’s body. I found that even the experts in child development and pediatrics seem to disagree on a definition.

To gain insight from residents in our area, I did an on-line survey. For the purposes of this survey, I defined spanking as “a swat or two to the buttocks or extremity (hand, arm, leg) leaving no bruise or

lasting mark on the skin.” This definition was similar to that used in scholarly research documents. Of the 30 respondents in my informal survey, 90 percent agreed with this definition.



The responses from residents in our area largely mirrored what researchers found during their studies. 73 percent said they spanked, but 77 percent felt that spanking was not an effective means of discipline for all children. Most respondents indicated that they used spanking to modify behavior or get the child’s attention regarding unacceptable behavior. This information then begs the question, why spank at all then? Most people seem to feel that it is their last resort to get the child’s attention, especially in a situation where harm could come to the child from continuing the inappropriate behavior.

As humans, we all have a limit to our patience. We also need to understand that in most instances, especially with very young children, they are not acting inappropriately on purpose. No one is born knowing that fire is hot, nor with the ability to communicate in complete sentences; these are learned. If you have never been burned by something hot, how do you know what hot is? During the process of development and with guidance, we learn that hot leads to burns and burns lead to pain.

As parents we are a child’s first educator so we have to teach children that actions have consequences. Children do not innately know running into a street is dangerous. Parents in the survey and research studies indicate they would spank to ensure the child understood what they did was dangerous.

Since a significant number of parents do spank, though rarely, nearly all respondents (87 percent)



Parenting Tip

felt spanking should not be done in anger, and that some parents should never spank. Most studies show that parents feel if you cannot control your anger, you should not spank. Most also agree that below the age of one and after the age of 10, spanking is not appropriate. That also goes for children with special needs such as autism or those who have been abused in the past.

Pendleton parent Camie Britt had this to say about spanking: “Each child is unique and you cannot effectively apply spanking by age. Some kids need other forms of discipline, but spanking can be very effective for young ones who completely understand they have disobeyed. It must be done calmly and reasonably with a clear understanding of what it is for and plenty of comfort and assurance after.”

It is clear through the studies and the informal survey that spanking is likely to continue to be used by parents as a form of discipline. The consensus is that spanking should be used sparingly because it does not have a high level of effectiveness. As with all parenting techniques, each of us needs to decide what works with each individual child. Children are unique and what works with one will not necessarily work with another, even within a single household.

Pendleton home economist Virginia Justice and her husband have two college-aged daughters.

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