U.S. cultures, faith groups differ on corporal punishment

by Stephanie Hanes

October 21, 2014

(The Christian Science Monitor) The way corporal punishment evolved in Sandy Haase's family is, in many ways, typical. Growing up in Orange County, in California, in the 1960s, Haase knew what would happen if her father got angry. If she or one of her siblings talked back, or perhaps turned on the TV when they were not supposed to do so, "it was 'Go and get the yardstick,' " she said.

The "spankings" that would follow, she said, were angry, severe, and scary. One instance left her in need of bandages. When she had children of her own, she and her husband agreed that they would use spanking only as a last resort.

Which is what they did, recalls her 22-year-old son, Colin.

"It helped me," he said. "It set me straight when I wasn't listening to words."

Sandy Haase expresses ambivalence about it.

"I know there were times when I did it when I was getting extremely frustrated," she said. "I would flash back to my dad and think, 'Oh gosh, am I doing what my dad did?' "

As in the Haase family, overall support in America for corporal punishment, polls show, has decreased significantly during past decades. But swirling around every spank or paddle are questions about the line between discipline and abuse, the proper way to use physical punishment, intentions versus actions, outcomes versus causes.

This came into sharp focus last month when public debate erupted after NFL running back Adrian Peterson was arrested on child abuse charges for giving, in his words, a "whupping" to his 4-year-old son for pushing another child.

Prosecutors say Peterson hit his son repeatedly with a switch, the common name for a thin, flexible twig or stick, leaving multiple cuts and bruises on the boy.

Soon child advocates took to the airwaves to condemn corporal punishment overall, while other commentators lambasted the National Football League for having an apparent problem with domestic violence. But soon a number of Southerners, who are more likely to spank their children, told the Northeast opinion writers to back off. Some evangelicals brought up the biblical warning about sparing the rod, spoiling the child. A number of high-profile athletes defended Peterson, including former pro basketball star Charles Barkley, who said that if corporal punishment were a crime, then “every black parent in the South is going to be in jail.” And parents began arguing in chat groups and on radio call-in shows that switching and spanking were different things, and that outsiders shouldn’t be telling moms and dads how to raise their kids, anyhow.

Indeed, some academics fret about the term “corporal punishment” because it is both misunderstood and broad; used officially in the parenting context it means any physical punishment—or discipline, depending on one’s view—of children.

But whatever one’s interpretation of this volatile topic, peeling back the debate over corporal punishment soon uncovers the divisions and misunderstandings between American cultures and races, regions and religions, parenting experts and everyday parents.

Evaluating numerous national surveys taken over the past decades, Murray Straus, an expert on corporal punishment at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, found that the number of parents who say spanking is sometimes necessary dropped from more than 90 percent in 1968 to about 65 or 70 percent in 1994, and then has remained fairly steady through today. Researchers have found that the number of parents who use corporal punishment has also decreased.

While the numbers may reflect a decrease in corporal punishment, they are still high. Figures differ, survey to survey, but most research concludes that 65 to 85 percent of parents have used corporal punishment.

Every state in the union allows corporal punishment. (Similar hitting between adults is generally considered assault, and convicted criminals are legally protected from corporal punishment.)

Some pastors specifically encourage corporal punishment from the pulpit.

“God says your children desperately, desperately, desperately need to be spanked,” said Voddie Baucham in a 2007 sermon to the Hardin Baptist Church in Texas. “Amen, hallelujah, praise the Lord and spank your kids—OK? They desperately need to be spanked. And they need to be spanked often.”

Differences among groups in spanking

In the early 1990s, a growing number of academic studies began showing a clear connection between corporal punishment and children’s aggressive behavior. Those children who were spanked more were more likely later to be involved in partner-to-partner domestic violence, face academic and health risks, and fall behind in a whole host of social indicators.

But for the most part, those studies followed white Americans. Researchers, who were becoming increasingly convinced of the dangers of corporal punishment, realized that they needed to replicate their findings within other demographics before they could make credible recommendations about eliminating it. So they began a number of studies evaluating the effect of corporal punishment on more diverse groups of children, with a particular focus on African Americans.

What they found surprised and bothered many of them. In various studies, researchers found that the effect of spanking on black children was different than it was on white children. In 2004, for instance, scholar Jennifer Lansford, working with Kenneth Dodge of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, reported findings from a diverse group of 585 children they followed from prekindergarten through 11th grade. Rather than making black children, as a group, more aggressive and worse off, some instances of corporal punishment within that demographic seemed to correspond to better outcomes.

That report immediately drew accusations of racism. Some warned that it was dangerous, and could be interpreted as actual encouragement to spank children. But what the Duke researchers—who are still opposed to corporal punishment—determined is that the damage caused to children by spanking, paddling, or other sorts of punishments is less about the physical act than it is about the psychological message imparted by the parent to the child.

“To the extent that the child understands and appreciates genuinely that the child is loved by the parent, and that even though it hurts, the parent’s intent is to help the child—to the extent that the child understands that, the consequences are not negative,” Dodge said. “If the child interprets it as a parent who is out of control," negative outcomes can happen.

Whether or not the child sees a parent as out of control can depend on the way a child is spanked, as well as how spanking is viewed in their wider community: as something done by normal, loving parents, or something taboo, done behind closed doors in secret, explosive moments of anger.

This is one of the misunderstood aspects of the Peterson case, Dodge and others say. Much of the commentary and criticism has focused on the injuries to Peterson’s son—and indeed, lasting injury is one of the ways most states draw the line between parental rights and abuse. But more important than the physical marks of corporal punishment is the psychological harm that often accompanies it.

But that psychological harm, some scholars point out, can also come from nonspanking punishment such as screaming. Moments when parents “lose it” with their children verbally can be even more damaging than spanking, psychologists say. But as one scholar pointed out, there aren’t any efforts to ban white moms from yelling.

After Peterson’s arrest, a number of commentators spoke about the reasons black families may feel more inclined toward corporal punishment: according to the University of Chicago General Social Survey, blacks are 11 percentage points more likely than whites to favor it. Many pointed out that there are simply different stressors and priorities facing white and black families in America. While many white children have the luxury of growing up thinking the world revolves around them, many black children grow up in environments where misbehavior can be a matter of life and death, commentators said.

Just look, some argued, at the recent police shooting of the unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

“We predominantly white parenting experts have done a disservice to black parents like Adrian Peterson,” says Robert Larzelere, a professor at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater with an expertise in parenting and corporal punishment. “We don’t give someone like that a credible alternative to the way he was raised. He

hears this prohibition language and he thinks, ‘Well, I wouldn’t turn out the way I did if I wasn’t spanked.’ ”

A few recent studies, however, have questioned those early 2000s connections between corporal punishment and race. George Holden of Southern Methodist University in Dallas says that the difference in attitudes and outcomes is socioeconomic and regional rather than racial. Other studies show that families with more children tend to spank more. And, as with just about everything in the research about corporal punishment, the effect attributed to spanking depends on how numbers are crunched and interpreted.

This is one of the biggest problems that Larzelere, who has studied corporal punishment for decades, has with the current ideological wave suggesting a full ban on all forms of physical discipline.

While he agrees that corporal punishment certainly can have a negative effect on a child, he worries that much of the research linking spanking and aggression does not differentiate between a harsh beating when a parent is furious and a quick swat to the rump with an open hand when the parent is calm. He also said that while it’s clear that aggression in children correlates with having been spanked, it’s not always clear which came first—the chicken and egg problem, as he puts it.

“If you look at the frequency of any discipline act over the past year, if the frequency increases so does the aggression in school the next year,” he says. “So I think the correlation is explained entirely by the fact that some kids are more oppositional than others, and that causes parents to use more of every kind of discipline tactic.”

There are studies that show how some controlled spanking can be positive, he said.

“Backup spanking,” done calmly and in a consistent manner with defiant 2-to-6-year-olds, in order to back up more mild forms of discipline such as timeouts, is shown to be effective at changing behavior, Larzelere said. Indeed, recent work by Marjorie Gunnoe at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has shown that children who have been spanked in this sort of way have better outcomes than children who have never been spanked. (There are few studies evaluating never-spanked children because, until very recently, there simply weren’t enough of them.)

While Jared Pingleton, director of counseling at Focus on the Family, headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado, agrees that a certain type of spanking is an important disciplinary tool, he also is adamant that children need protection, and said most parents are not in enough control of their own emotions to administer spankings in the calm, consistent, and rational way that can have a positive effect.

“The first and last thing we need to emphasize is that a child should never be abused,” he said.