

Risky Corporal Punishment


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Opinions on the relationship between physical discipline and child abuse can vary widely. According to Coleman, Dodge, and Campbell (2010), the current language used in state laws on corporal punishment leaves many interpretation loopholes: “[A]ll states’ laws permit the use of ‘reasonable’ corporal punishment; simultaneously, they all prohibit nonaccidentally inflicted serious injury. The latter is generally denominated abuse” (p. 107). Most states then place “neglect,” or “milder but still impermissible injuries,” in the middle of this continuum between punishment and abuse (p. 107). The trouble, according to the authors, is the ambiguous and subjective nature of these terms, which do little to help caretakers understand what appropriate discipline is and what it is not (p. 108). In this way, the ambiguity surrounding child mistreatment can contribute to increased incidences of child abuse. Several infamous examples demonstrate that the concerns of these authors are valid and caregivers frequently cross the line between non-injurious physical chastisement and extreme cruelty.

In a *New York Times* article, Raftery (2011) summarized the circumstances surrounding the homicide of a thirteen-year-old girl from Ethiopia adopted at age eleven. Her adoptive parents “had deprived her of food for days at a time and had made her sleep in a cold barn or a closet and shower outside with a hose. [T]hey often whipped her, leaving marks on her legs” (p. 1). The parents, Carrie and Larry Williams, undertook these measures to correct what they viewed as Hana’s unwillingness to submit to their parental authority. The Williams were reportedly following, in a partial sense, the parenting advice of the corporal-punishment advocates Michael and Debi Pearl, who wrote a book on discipline called *To Train up a Child*. The book advises spanking with belts and plastic tubing, although not to the extremes used on Hana.

Clearly, the punishments inflicted on Hana by her parents overstep any state's definition of acceptable corporal punishment, but the formula outlined by the Pearls would be considered appropriate by many. The danger is the two scenarios share underlying principals about submission and parental power, making it easy for the thoughts on light spanking to later justify extremes. Raftery (2011) noted, "Mr. Pearl describes child-rearing as a zero-sum test of wills. If a verbal warning does not work, he said, 'you have the seeds of self-destruction'" (p. 2). A verbal reprimand then becomes a spanking. **If the initial spanking does not bring about the desired level of submission, parents might employ spanking with an object to cause more pain.** 
This line of reasoning could easily lead to trouble, as it did with Hana.

Spanking is not the only method of corporal punishment that has morphed into child abuse. Hamblin (2014) reported for *The Atlantic* on Alexa, a five-year-old who died after her parents made her drink "2.4 liters of soda and water over one-to-two hours" as a punishment (para. 3). Such bizarre forms of corporal punishment exemplify the dangerous ambiguity discussed by Coleman, Dodge, and Campbell (2010) between using discomfort as punishment and causing serious injury. According to the district attorney in the case, "[Randall and Mary Vaughn] treated this child so cruelly that it caused the child to die. . . I don't know if their intent was to kill the child, but their intent certainly was to harm the child" (as cited in Hamblin, 2014, para. 8). No laws exist to prevent parents from forcing their children to drink water or soda as a punishment, just as no laws exist about putting soap in a child's mouth. However, in this case and others, the aim of punishing a child by causing him or her physical discomfort has become abuse.

Some critics might argue that reasonable parents intuitively know where to put the boundary between a physical reprimand and abuse.  However, ideas on corporal punishment vary

widely, and Zolotor (2008) found a link between parents who spank their children and increased risk of child abuse in that “12 percent of mothers who reported spanking with an object [25 percent of the study’s 1,435 respondents] also reported abusive punishment” (as cited in “Study Shows,” 2008, para. 8). An additional six percent who said they spanked with just the hand [45 percent of the study’s respondents] also admitted to using punishments that cross the line. These statistics further exemplify the dangerous link between abuse and corporal punishment.



Corporal punishment is a controversial issue with many factions. A punishment that initially seems appropriate to a caretaker can quickly spiral into an act that causes serious harm to a child. According to Coleman, Dodge, and Campbell (2010), the child-abuse laws currently on the books do little to clarify the difference between corporal punishment, neglect, and abuse. In the cases of Hana Williams and Alexa Linboom, the parents’ actions are clearly in the realm of abuse. However, the point at which these caretakers crossed the legal line remains ambiguous, and little is being done to prevent other guardians from making similarly dangerous judgment calls.

References

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