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Spare the Rod? America's Parents Just Won't Get With the Science

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Alan E. Kazdin is a frustrated man, and it's America's parents who are frustrating him. These parents are, of all things, prone to use an occasional spanking in disciplining their children. Dr. Kazdin's great frustration is that these parents insist on doing what seems right to them, and thus they are ignoring or rejecting the fact that "science" shows that spankings don't work.



Dr. Kazdin is John M. Musser Professor of Psychology and Child Psychiatry at Yale University and director of the university's Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. Writing at *Slate.com*, Kazdin argues that parents just don't get it — "The typical parent, when whacking a misbehaving child, doesn't pause to wonder: 'What does science have to say about the efficacy of corporal punishment?'" No kidding. Is the parent supposed to go review the scientific data before dealing with a disobedient child? Just how out of touch can the folks at Yale be?

Slate.com is one of the most interesting digital magazines yet to appear. It leans predictably leftward, but offers some of the brightest reportage to be found anywhere in today's journalism. Nevertheless, Kazdin's article, "[Spare the Rod: Why You Shouldn't Hit Your Kids](#)," reads more like a parody of an article than as a serious article in a serious magazine.

After acknowledging that parents do not pause to ask the science question before "whacking a misbehaving child," Kazdin concedes that most American parents admit to spanking and that most children and adolescents (85%) report having been spanked.

"Parents cite children's aggression and failure to comply with a request as the most common reasons for hitting them," Kazdin reports. But, he insists, science shows that spanking just doesn't work over time. Though spanking may produce an immediate change in the child's behavior, children are "endowed with wonderful flexibility and ability to learn" and adapt to punishments faster "than parents can escalate it."

Of course, that same flexibility and ability to learn could well explain why spanking *does* work, but that would not fit Kazdin's line of argument, to say the least.

Professor Kazdin provides an indictment of spanking that includes the charge that parents generally can't stop themselves from "stepping up from a mild, generally harmless dose to an excessive and harmful one." He even suggests that spanking is addictive . . . like smoking cigarettes.

Here is some of the scientific research Professor Kazdin wants America's parents to take into account:

The negative effects on children include increased aggression and noncompliance—the very misbehaviors that most often inspire parents to hit in the first place—as well as poor academic achievement, poor quality of parent-child relationships, and increased risk of a mental-health problem (depression or anxiety, for instance). High levels of corporal

punishment are also associated with problems that crop up later in life, including diminished ability to control one's impulses and poor physical-health outcomes (cancer, heart disease, chronic respiratory disease). Plus, there's the effect of increasing parents' aggression, and don't forget the consistent finding that physical punishment is a weak strategy for permanently changing behavior.

All of this is put forth without even a single footnote or citation. We are just to take Professor Kazdin's word for all this. He argues that "the science" shows this and shows that, but anyone who reads scientific reports knows that there is nothing so clearly defined as "the science" about just about anything. The "findings" Kazdin summarizes in the paragraph above appear to be matters of correlation anyway. When a report suggests that spanking (or anything else) is "associated with" a list of ills and bad outcomes, realize that "associated with" is a very thin argument. Non-spanking may be just as or even more "associated with" these same issues, under the right conditions and described by the right definitions.

Professor Kazdin laments the fact that "most of us pay, at best, selective attention to science." He understands that scientists "have not done a good job of publicizing what they know about corporal punishment." Parents believe that spanking works, at least to some useful extent, and they reject what are presented as arguments based in what "the science" has to say against it.

Kazdin is simply infatuated with "the science." What case can be made against spanking? "It can be argued from the science," he assures. Research "consistently shows" that spanking does not work over time.

Kazdin wants spanking to be outlawed. He reports that 91 nations have banned spanking in the schools and 23 have banned corporal punishment even in the home — generally by criminalizing parents who spank.

He also offers this news bulletin sure to attract the ire of America's parents:

Practically nobody in America knows or cares that the United Nations has set a target date of 2009 for a universal prohibition of violence against children that would include a ban on corporal punishment in the home.

Ah, so now parents are up against, not only "the science," but the United Nations as well. Kazdin does not call for any specific legislative provision that would ban spanking, but "we ought to be able to at least discuss it with each other like grownups." It is time to question "the primacy of rights that parents exercise in the home." Thanks for the warning.

Professor Kazdin's confidence in "the science" just demonstrates that scientists often have short memories. In all too many cases, what is considered "the science" in one generation is laughed off in the next.

In her important book, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children*, Ann Hulbert traces the progression of conflicting advice offered by scientists to parents through the twentieth century. As she makes clear, these "experts" cannot even agree on the most basic issues. She lays out two opposite views of parenting that appear in the literature. The first argues that parents need to assert more authority; the second argues that parents should be more empathetic with their children. Popular theories based on what has been called "the science" swing on that pendulum. The "experts" almost never come back to admit they were wrong.

As Hulbert explains:

America's parenting experts, in short, have fared no better or worse than the rest of us in the quest for calm consistency in child-rearing technique and theory. The story of the popular advisors' search for clarity about children and for authority with mothers is marked by controversies, contradictions, and unintended consequences. Among the most ironic of these consequences has been to leave parents, teachers, policymakers, ministers, and the media — to say nothing of the experts themselves — convinced that expert counsel is precisely what it was not supposed to be: constantly shifting and conflicting, throwing both grown people and children here and there like balls.

We can safely assume that Professor Kazdin is genuinely concerned about America's children and their welfare, but he joins the ranks of those who would, like the proverbial desperate attorney, beg the jury to ignore what they can see with their own eyes. In this case, the jury represents the nation's parents — and they are not buying this argument.

Christian parents have a special stake in this controversy, because the Bible speaks so directly to the use of corporal punishment and the necessity of disciplining disobedient children. Furthermore, Christian parents should feel a shiver go down the spine when the United Nations is invoked as the moral authority.

Professor Kazdin's article also reminds us of the limitations of science and the inadequacy of scientism as a worldview. There is no such authority as "the science," and the contradictory debris of now outdated scientific theories and "findings" should be sufficient and persuasive evidence of that fact.

I do agree with Professor Kazdin on this major point: "The typical parent, when whacking a misbehaving child, doesn't pause to wonder: 'What does science have to say about the efficacy of corporal punishment?'"

Perhaps some smart child will keep Professor Kazdin's article at hand, to be pulled out the next time mom or dad decides to spank. Nice try kid, but I wouldn't count on that working, either.

Photo taken on U.S. highway 31-E in Barren County, Kentucky, October 6, 2008. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

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