POLICY STATEMENT Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children

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Corporal Punishment in Schools

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abstract

The use of corporal punishment in schools is not an effective or ethical method for management of behavior concerns and causes harm to students. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that corporal punishment in all school settings be abolished in all states by law and replaced by alternative forms of student behavior management. Corporal punishment remains legal in many public and private schools in the United States and is disproportionately used among Black students and children with disabilities. The aims of this policy statement are to review the incidence of school-based corporal punishment; the negative physical, psychological, and developmental impact of corporal punishment on students; and the need for continued advocacy by pediatricians, educators, and parents to abolish corporal punishment in all schools.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Corporal punishment, defined as the infliction of pain upon a person's body as punishment, is not an effective or ethical method for management of behavior concerns and causes harm to students. Therefore, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that corporal punishment in all school settings be abolished in all states by law and that alternative age-appropriate and nonviolent forms of student behavior management be used. This policy statement is aligned with the AAP policy statement "Effective Discipline to Raise Healthy Children,"[1] which provides evidence to support the recommendation that "adults caring for children use healthy forms of discipline, such as positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviors, setting limits, redirecting, and setting future expectations." The AAP recommends "that parents do not use spanking, hitting, slapping, threatening, insulting, humiliating, or shaming."

The Civil Rights Data Collection is conducted by the US Department of Education to measure key markers of education and civil rights in US public schools.[2] These data include children in preschool and children and adolescents in kindergarten through 12th grade in public schools. Corporal punishment is defined by the Civil Rights Data Collection as "paddling, spanking, or other forms of physical punishment imposed on

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a child." In *Ingraham v Wright*, the US Supreme Court ruled school-based corporal punishment as constitutional, leaving states to decide on the issue.[3] Corporal punishment in schools remains legal despite the evidence that it is ineffective and harmful and despite the availability of effective and nonviolent discipline measures. At present, corporal punishment is legal in public schools in 18 states and legal in private schools in all states except Iowa and New Jersey (Table 1).[4] Across the United States, 96% of public schools report not using corporal punishment.[5] However, the rates of corporal punishment in schools that do use it range from 0.6% to 9.0% of students per year, with the highest rates in states located in the southern United States.[5] These rates translate to almost 70 000 students being struck at least once by school personnel during the school year.[6]

Among US schools that use corporal punishment, racial, gender, and ability disparities exist: students who have disabilities and identify as Black or male are more likely to experience corporal punishment than students who do not have disabilities and identify as white or female.[7–9] "Adultification bias," in which "adults perceive Black youth as being older than they actually are,"[10] may be one type of bias that may lead educators to justify more harsh punishment of Black students.[11] National data show that Black boys are nearly twice as likely to be struck as white boys (14% vs 7.5%), and Black girls are more than 3 times as likely to be struck as white girls (5.2% vs 1.7%).[12] Analysis of state-level data shows that some states have even greater disparities in the use of corporal punishment against Black students compared with white students.[5,8,9,13]

TABLE 1 States in Which Corporal Punishment Remains Legal in Public Schools in 2022

States[a]
- Idaho
- Wyoming
- Arizona
- Colorado
- Kansas
- Oklahoma
- Texas
- Missouri
- Arkansas
- Indiana
- Kentucky
- Mississippi
- Alabama
- Georgia
- South Carolina
- Florida
- Louisiana[b]
- Tennessee[b]

[a] Corporal punishment may be banned in certain cities or schools; policy users should verify up-to-date laws in their states.
[b] Banned in public schools for students with disabilities.

Fourteen percent of children and adolescents age 3 through 21 years are identified as having a disability, defined by receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (these are students with an Individualized Education Program).[14] National data show that among students who received physical punishment at school, 16.5% were served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; therefore, students with disabilities are overrepresented among students who are physically punished at school.[6] Analysis of state-level data shows that some states have greater disparities in the use of corporal punishment against students with identified disabilities versus those without.[7] When students with disabilities are subjected to corporal punishment for behaviors associated with their disabilities, they are unjustly and excessively punished and deprived of access to quality education and a safe learning environment.[7] Students with intellectual disability who receive corporal punishment may find it challenging to understand social rules, the consequence of their actions, or the reason behind their punishment. In addition, they may be unable to communicate the incident to their parent(s). For students possessing more than 1 marginalized identity (eg, race and ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation), the presence of these shared identities may target them for increased corporal punishment and demonstrates the unique perils described by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality framework.[15]

Corporal punishment is not effective as a disciplinary method.[1] The majority of studies about the effects of corporal punishment on children and adolescents have focused on punishment used by parents or primary caregivers and have been reviewed elsewhere.[6,7] Meta-analyses conducted in 2013 and 2016 indicate that spanking by parents or primary caregivers is associated with worse, not better, behaviors among children.[12,16] A 2017 survey study among parents from a variety of countries and cultures suggests that use of corporal punishment is associated with more problematic, externalizing behaviors among children across cultures, regardless of parental perception of the severity or justness of the punishment.[17] In the short-term, corporal punishment may cause a child or adolescent to be fearful and immediately obedient. However, over the long-term, corporal punishment does not improve behavior. Corporal punishment by parents or caregivers is associated with a range of negative effects among children and adolescents, including a higher incidence of behavior and mental health problems, impaired cognitive development, poor educational outcomes, impaired social-emotional development, problems with the ongoing relationship between parents and children, a higher risk for physical abuse, increased aggression and perpetration of violence, antisocial behavior, and decreased moral internalization of appropriate

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behavior.[18] A meta-analysis of studies regarding spanking and child outcomes found that being spanked as a child was associated with adult antisocial behavior, adult mental health problems, and adult support for physical punishment.[12] Studies regarding use of physical punishment and outcomes necessarily use observational rather than experimental designs and show association rather than causation; however, the consistency of findings across studies and over time suggest that it may be appropriate to draw causal conclusions.[18]

Based on these findings, it follows that corporal punishment inflicted on students by school personnel also causes harm. A 2019 survey of 18 to 23 year old young adults who attended high school in US states where corporal punishment is legal found that 16% (128 of 803) had experienced corporal punishment at school.[18] Among those who experienced corporal punishment, 82% reported it was painful and 22% reported they had bruises or other injuries from corporal punishment. The young adults who reported experiencing corporal punishment reported lower cumulative high school grade point averages and lower feelings of school belonging. Most studies about the effects of corporal punishment in schools have been conducted in countries other than the United States. One ecological study across 88 countries found that countries that prohibited corporal punishment at home and in schools had a lower self-reported prevalence of physical fighting among male and female adolescents attending school.[19] This effect was reduced to less physical fighting among female adolescents only when countries prohibited corporal punishment in schools but not at home.[19] Although an ecological study cannot determine whether a true association exists between the independent (corporal punishment) and dependent (physical fighting) variables, this study does suggest that additional research to establish a true association should be conducted. A longitudinal survey study conducted among students in Korea showed that students who reported being verbally or physically aggressive toward others were more likely to receive corporal punishment from teachers and that this resulted in students continuing to be more aggressive in the future, resulting in a cycle that perpetuates aggression.[20] Finally, a longitudinal study conducted in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam found that in at least 2 out of the 4 countries, students who experienced corporal punishment at school had lower self-efficacy, self-esteem, and math scores over time compared with students who did not experience corporal punishment at school.[21]

Children cannot learn when they do not feel safe. A large number of effective, age-appropriate, nonviolent, and evidence-based alternatives to corporal punishment exist to promote desired student behaviors.[22] There are opportunities for schools to promote the behaviors by having curricula in place to support the social-emotional learning as well as alternative interventions for behaviors when they do occur, including: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, restorative justice, conflict resolution, mentoring, and individual therapy.[5] For children exposed to corporal punishment in school settings, schools must not only implement alternative discipline strategies, but simultaneously use trauma informed practices to repair trust between students and school adults and establish safe learning environments wherein adults are role-modeling positive alternative behaviors. When advocating for policies and practices that support the well-being of students, pediatrician advocates should be aware and respectful of the expertise of those in the field of education. The US and states' Departments of Education provide information on tools, resources, and technical assistance for creating a supportive school climate and promoting desired student behaviors (https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/support.html).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given the harm caused by corporal punishment in schools and the availability of alternative, effective nonviolent behavior interventions, the AAP recommends that corporal punishment in all school settings be abolished in all states by law and that alternative age-appropriate and nonviolent forms of student behavior management be used. Several factors continue to prevent some states from passing laws prohibiting corporal punishment, including concern about infringement on school district rights, cultural practices, and even some parents' preference for paddling over suspension.[23–25] Therefore, federal legislation may be required to overcome these barriers.[26]
- Pediatricians, educators, and parents play a critical role in advocating for the end of corporal punishment in schools within the US as well as internationally.
- As noted in the AAP policy statement, "The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health,"[27] pediatricians and other child health providers are in a position to "address and ameliorate the effects of racism on children and adolescents." Advocating to end corporal punishment, which is disproportionately used among Black, male students, is one way to address inequities based on race and reduce harm to Black students.
- Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to corporal punishment. When students with disabilities are subjected to corporal punishment for behaviors associated with their disabilities, they are unjustly and excessively punished and deprived of access to quality education and a safe learning environment. Advocating to end corporal punishment, which is disproportionately used among children with disabilities, is also a

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way to address inequities based on disability status and reduce harm to students with disabilities.

- Alternative age-appropriate and nonviolent behavioral strategies should be encouraged in place of corporal punishment, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, restorative justice, conflict resolution, mentoring, and individual therapy.

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ABBREVIATION

AAP: American Academy of Pediatrics

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