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“I’ve tried the switch but he laughs through the tears:”
The use and conceptualization of corporal punishment
during the Machine Age, 1924–1939[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: To examine attitudes, conflicts, images, circumstances, and time-period effects associated with corporal punishment and other forms of adult-to-child violence during the early 20th century in the United States.

Method: A sample of 147 letters, referencing corporal punishment and dating from 1924 to 1939, were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The letters were addressed to Angelo Patri (1876–1965), a popular child-rearing expert during the interwar years (also known as the Machine Age), and written primarily by middle class parents with everyday worries about child rearing and proper discipline.

Results: People who sought advice emphasized the practical significance of corporal punishment over and above the idea that it violated children’s rights to be protected against harm. One in four letters cited conflicts with significant others about corporal punishment. Generally, children were perceived as frail, defiant, or feral. Rarely, were they seen as devilish or, conversely, innocent. Children’s disobedience and disrespect were cited more than other misbehaviors as reasons for corporal punishment. Age and gender of the focal child varied by time period when letters from the 1920s and 1930s were compared.

Conclusions: A full understanding of parent-to-child violence cannot be achieved without a firm grasp of its genealogy. The growing popularity of child psychology during the Machine Age had a measurable impact on how children were viewed. A utilitarian frame of interpretation was an important part of the everyday “work” associated

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with child rearing during this time, foreshadowing the tendency today to emphasize efficacy more than rights when evaluating the legitimacy of corporal punishment.

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Introduction

The history of corporal punishment is a fascinating chronicle. Throughout the years, flagellation has probably been the most common method, including the use of the “birch” against children in European homes and schools (Scott, 1974; Van Yelyr, 1942). During the 16th and 17th centuries, whipping and beating children were common occurrences, both in Europe and in Colonial America (Gibson, 1978; Greven, 1990). The right of parents to use force was rarely questioned, and the Colonial “stubborn child law” permitted parents to beat or even kill obstinate children (Eisenberg, 1981). Over the last 300 years, however, at least according to the child-rearing manuals of the times, there was a shift from wholehearted acceptance of corporal punishment to limited approval. By the 1830s the practice of “whipping” children with objects faded in popularity as “spanking” gained in acceptance (Pleck, 1987). The new way of thinking about corporal punishment may have peaked during the extensive reforms of the 1870s in the United States when child cruelty was discovered by professionals, agencies, and the media (Pfhol, 1977).

In the wake of these reforms—following what may be called a “volcano of moral outrage” (Pleck, 1989, p. 20)—child abuse was redefined as a type of family problem. By the turn of the century, agency workers increasingly were concerned about moral neglect as well as physical cruelty (Gordon, 1988). Because of the changing climate, many parents may have become more lenient with children and less harsh in their punishment (Macleod, 1998; Pollock, 1983).

The years between 1890 and 1920—America’s Progressive Era—can be described as a time of expanding concern for children’s rights among professionals who often believed that children not only needed, but also deserved, a host of reforms to protect them against cruelties both at home and in institutions (Platt, 1969; Pleck, 1987). Corporal punishment in public schools came under sharp attack, and a survey of 83 school superintendents conducted at the time found that 66% of them “opposed corporal punishment altogether, or accepted it in only the most exceptional circumstances.” Said one, “No well-poised, just, self-controlled, warm hearted man or woman needs to, wants to, or would, beat a child.” Said another, “Even in the training of horses blows are not permissible” (reported in Ashby, 1997, p. 99).

With the dawning of the Machine Age (1918–1941) (Wilson, Pilgrim, & Tashjian, 1986), professional approaches took a different turn. Instead of continuing to see corporal punishment primarily in terms of children’s rights, child-rearing experts began to talk more about whether it had utilitarian value: *Did it work?* The experts were not the first to think in pragmatic terms, but they did reawaken an interest in assessing corporal punishment’s effect. At the same time, the middle class exhibited a growing infatuation with the world of science and the application of child psychology. In addition, “[a]n emphasis on personality [development] favored case studies, tests, measurements, therapy, and labels such as ‘deviancy’ and ‘maladjustment’. . . . [and] tilted child saving from a cause to a job in which experts detached themselves from their ‘clients’” and elevated ‘objectivity’ over moral outrage and ‘involvement’” (Ashby, 1997, p. 105; also see Hulbert, 2003). Corporal punishment, in other words, became a *practical* matter. This is not

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