

# ELIMINATING THE USE OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

**Physical punishment – an adult’s use of physical force (e.g., corporal punishment, spanking, paddling) to punish a child or correct a child’s inappropriate behavior – increases aggression in young children and is ineffective in teaching a child responsibility and self-control.<sup>1</sup> New evidence suggests that corporal punishment may cause further harm to the child by affecting healthy brain development.<sup>2</sup> A number of strategies exist to promote positive parenting and discipline strategies that do not include hitting or the physical use of force with children.<sup>3</sup>**

## EVIDENCE

Substantial evidence shows negative long-term outcomes for children who are disciplined through corporal punishment.<sup>4</sup> In fact, findings indicate that children who are physically punished (i.e., spanked) have similarly negative outcomes to children that are physically abused.

In 2018, the American Academy of Pediatrics released an updated [position statement](#) opposing the use of corporal punishment. Outlined in this position statement are the negative developmental outcomes associated with physical and verbal punishment and the need to raise awareness of alternative discipline strategies that do not require hitting a child, but rather teaching appropriate behavior.

**31  
STATES**

have legislatively  
banned corporal  
punishment in  
schools or public  
institutions.<sup>5</sup>

## LEGISLATIVE ACTION TO ELIMINATE THE USE OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

Legislative approaches can reduce corporal punishment and can shift attitudes towards more effective, positive discipline strategies.<sup>6</sup> Countries with legislative restrictions or bans on corporal punishment have less public support and use of corporal punishment and have significantly less youth violence.<sup>7</sup>

**19  
STATES**

allow physical punishment in public schools for children from preschool through 12th grade.  
AL, AK, AZ, CO, FL, GA, ID, IN, KS, KY, LA, MO, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, and WY.<sup>8</sup>

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES TO ELIMINATE CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

The evidence linking physical punishment to negative outcomes for children has led to strategies designed to support and promote positive parenting and discipline strategies.

- **Healthy Families America & other evidence - based childhood home visiting programs** provide information, caregiver support, and training about the importance of positive parent-child relationships, child health and development, and support in addressing concrete needs. Outcomes seen through home visiting include a decrease in physical punishment, with an increase in more positive discipline with less verbal aggression.<sup>9</sup>
- **Universal public awareness campaigns** have the ability to shift societal norms by correcting misperceptions about the use of physical punishment and providing concrete alternatives. Organizational policies such as “No-Hit-Zones” help to create cultures where hitting of any kind is not tolerated.<sup>10</sup>
- **Legislative approaches that ban the use of physical punishment in school settings** have the ability to ensure that no child will experience physical punishment while at school. A recent survey commissioned by [Prevent Child Abuse America](#) found that only 18% of adults in the United States support corporal punishment in schools.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sege, R. D. & Siegel, B. S. (2018). *Effective discipline to raise healthy children*. *Pediatrics*, 142, 1-10. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3112>

<sup>2</sup>Cuartas, J., Weissman, D. G., Sheridan, M. A., Lengua, L., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2021). *Corporal punishment and elevated neural response to threat in children*. *Child Development*, 1-10. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13565>

<sup>3</sup>Gershoff, E., & Lee, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Ending the Physical Punishment of Children: A Guide for Clinicians and Practitioners*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1chrvv>

<sup>4</sup>Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). *Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses*. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30, 453-469. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>

<sup>5</sup>Gershoff, E. T., & Font, S. A. (2016). *Corporal punishment in U.S. public schools: Prevalence, disparities in use, and status in state and federal policy*. *Social Policy Report*, 30, 1-37.

<sup>6</sup>Zolotor, A. J., & Puzia, M. E. (2010). *Bans against corporal punishment: A systematic review of the laws, changes in attitudes and behaviors*. *Child Abuse Review*, 19, 229-247. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1131>

<sup>7</sup>Elgar, F. J., Donnelly, P. D., Michaelson V., Gariépy, G., Riehm, K. E., Walsh, S. D., & Prickett, W. (2018). *Corporal punishment bans and physical fighting in adolescents: An ecological study of 88 countries*. *BMJ Open*, 8, 1-8. doi: [10.1136/bmjopen-2018-021616](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-021616)

<sup>8</sup>Gershoff & Font (2016)

<sup>9</sup>Gershoff, E. T., Lee, S. J., & Durrant, J. E. (2017). *Promising intervention strategies to reduce parents’ use of physical punishment*. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 71, 9-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.01.017>

<sup>10</sup>Gershoff, E.T., Font, S.A., Taylor, C.A., Budzak-Garza, A., Olson-Dorff, D., & Foster, R.H. (2018). *A short-term evaluation of a hospital no hit zone policy to increase bystander intervention in cases of parent-to-child violence*. *Children and Youth Review*, 94, 155-162.

<sup>11</sup>Klika, J. B., & Fleckman, J. (2021). *Physical punishment: Attitudes, behaviors, and norms associated with its use across the US*. *Prevent Child Abuse America*. Retrieved from [www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)