



by Karen Stephens

Child Abuse Breaks a Child's Brain As Well As Heart

The poster's title grabbed my attention right away. It was so simple and straightforward. In bold it read: "12 Alternatives to Whacking Your Kid." No hypocritical, sugarcoated message there. No tiptoeing around the issue by saying, "12 ways to be more positive." The poster's goal was blunt: Don't hit the kids, seething or not; find another way to cope, another way to parent.

At first, I chuckled at the poster's plain talk. But it's not really a laughing matter, is it? The title laid an assumption on the table: There are times when a parent will want to hit their kid — and not just a quick *get-their-attention* swat on a thickly diapered behind, either.

The poster brings back soundtracks from my childhood around the neighborhood and even at school: "Little man, you're cruisin' for a bruisin'." "Keep that up, young lady, and I'll give you something to cry about." "A good wallop will straighten you out." "That kid's gonna get a beating the likes of which he'll never forget."

Today's kids still endure such threats, and many are carried out. Children don't forget being hit, much less a severe spanking. But they are incredibly forgiving of adults who hurt them. It's an irreconcilable irony.

Of course, abuse plays emotional havoc on a child's heart. But today's science tells us other organs are damaged, too. Whether the violence is verbal or physical, abusive experiences become seared into a child's brain, into their memory networks. The searing interferes with normal development in all other areas of maturation. The brain's neural networks can't connect up in normal fashion, thereby impairing the brain's ability to process information. And so, children's skill mastery and concept development is hampered. That's revealed in lousy impulse control and poor frustration tolerance.

The carving tool that interferes with brain networks is a flood of stress hormones released into a child's bloodstream during an abusive attack. That *fight or flight* response is an innate survival instinct kicking in; the child has no control over it. The visions, the sounds, the fright and fear and terror, become a rush of chemicals carved into children's gray matter, disabling learning capacity. And I mean intellectually and socially, as well as emotionally. That puts all of society at risk.

There are other good reasons for not hitting kids to get them to behave. Bottom line, hitting doesn't solve problems; it simply stirs the stew of conflict and power struggles so it boils over. Children's resentment builds. An intense desire for revenge is fueled.

Hitting doesn't promote children's senses of remorse or regret — important feelings they need to motivate them to control their behavior. Resentment and revenge leads to an increase in children's challenging misbehavior, not a decrease. Oh sure, hitting can stop a particular behavior — that is, at the time of the hitting — but usually only for a short time, meaning as long as the adult is within sight. The adult disappears and the behavior resumes and often escalates. Kids just learn to be more sneaky and devious. Children who learn to obey parents only out of fear of being hit, don't develop the ability to monitor and control their own violent impulses. And thus, we watch the cycle of domestic and public violence spiral from one generation to the next.

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In the short term, hitting a child may reduce a parent's tension. But once the dust settles, a parent with an ounce of compassion must be appalled at his or her own behavior. But the truth is, a lot of kids get hit because their parent's life is stress-filled. Parents don't usually start out to abuse a child. But *ordinary spankings* so easily cross the line of abuse before parents even realize it. The parent is caught up in his own rage and completely loses good judgment.

Kids get hit when an inflamed parent can't take a swing at the boss or the neighbor who crosses the property line one time too many. Kids get hit when a parent gets cut off in the fast lane when coming home from work. And, well, kids get hit because of a million and one nerve-pinching things they have absolutely no control over.

Frustrated parents, pushed beyond rationality, hit kids because children are smaller than they are, because they have kids cornered behind closed doors of home — all in the name of privacy and parental rights. Parents who hit kids do it because, more often than not, the public stands by and lets them get away with it. We don't report, we don't reach out, we don't help. And so, the kids are let down by an ever greater circle of adults.

But it is always, first and foremost, the adult's responsibility to lead children away from the dance of violence.

I know talking about hitting kids is a downright ugly, stomach-churning topic. But the poster's message is so important. Someone had the guts to put their cards on the table and not waste time. The author's belief rang out loud and clear: hitting is not, and never will be, an acceptable parenting technique. Period.

It's disheartening a poster has to remind us of such a logical truth — that bringing up a fine, stable, respectful and caring next generation can't grow from violence. As I write that, I know some will remind me that there are always two sides to every whacking story. And it's true. Some children indulge in awfully aggravating behavior. Some are much more challenging, trying, and difficult than others. And some kids even intentionally push a parent's buttons, seeing how far they can go as mom or pop teeters on the brink of explosion. Those kids can be relentless; they know every button of their parent's anger grid by heart.

But even when both sides are considered, in the final analysis, at the crossroads of violent situations, someone has to choose the path of dignified, humane behavior. Who else should it be but the adult? The best way to lead is by example. For parents, that means no hitting allowed. No hitting each other. No hitting children.

In real life with real kids, almost every parent, at one time or another feels like whacking their kid. At wit's end, parents get the urge to whack. Frankly, the urge to hit is very normal for humans — watch any toddler at play and you'll see it can be a knee-jerk, first resort reaction. But an adult following through on the urge to hit a vulnerable child is a huge, unacceptable problem.

Physically or verbally intimidating children doesn't help them behave correctly or become better people. It only teaches them that it's okay to use violence, especially if you're an adult bigger than someone else.

Yes, it always takes two to tango — including in some abusive situations. But it is always, first and foremost, the adult's responsibility to lead children away from the dance of violence. Only then will our homes, child cares, schools and streets be safe from the storm of primal impulses.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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