Spare the Rod: Ending Corporal Punishment in Schools

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OBEJECTIVES

1. To identify the history and current state legislature regarding corporal punishment.
2. To choose to advocate to end corporal punishment in the school setting.
3. To teach nurse practitioners, parents, and school workers alternative discipline methods.

ABSTRACT

Corporal punishment elicits bodily pain to another individual to correct a behavior or language. This type of discipline has been proven ineffective and harmful to children, but it is still used in school settings across the United States (Allison, Beers, & Peterson, 2023). Given the negative impact corporal punishment poses to children, effective health policies can be implemented to end this form of discipline. This article presents a review of the impact of corporal punishment on childhood development, the current state legislature on corporal punishment in the school setting and review current federal-led policies that support the end of corporal punishment in school. This article will conclude by providing educational resources for pediatric providers, parents, and educators.

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACP) defines corporal punishment as "a discipline method in which a supervising adult deliberately inflicts pain upon a child in response to a child's unacceptable behavior and/or inappropriate language" (AACP Position Statement, 2014, para 1). It is a form of physical discipline that is often expressed by spanking, paddling, or whipping. It is difficult to make a distinction between corrective discipline and physical abuse with corporal punishment. The use of corporal punishment has been proven to hinder childhood development. (Visser, van der Put, & Assink, 2022). Even though current research suggests that corporal punishment is ineffective in behavior management, it is still legally practiced in school settings across the Southeastern states in the United States of America. There is a correlation between the use of school corporal punishment and decreased educational attainment and an increase in child mortality rates (Ward, Petersen, Kupchik & Pratt, 2021). Also, school corporal punishment may increase behavioral problems and decrease overall academic performance (Visser et al., 2022).

PROFESSIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

The leaders within pediatric societies have expressed their opinion and concerns about corporal punishment within the school setting. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly opposes the use of corporal punishment in schools. Corporal punishment is often used as a discipline method for marginalized students based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and abilities. This type of discipline often increases negative behavior, mental health issues, and impairs cognitive, social, and emotional relationships. Children have reported how painful this

type of punishment is, and approximately one-sixth of occurrences the child is left with physical markings which include bruises (Allison et al., 2023).

The National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP) also provides a firm stance against corporal punishment. Corporal punishment instills fear by eliciting pain in the child, hoping they will obey the parent or caregiver. This makes that individual child more at risk for physical abuse. Their position statement emphasizes the role of providers in educating all caregivers (including teachers) on alternative discipline methods. This includes teaching parents about positive discipline, where each action does have a consequence (NAPNAP Position Statement, 2022).

The World Health Organization (WHO) supports ending corporal punishment worldwide. Outside of the United States, corporal punishment is frequently used in the academic setting for behavior discipline. Corporal punishment can severely affect physical, emotional, and social health and negatively impact on a student's ability to learn. Corporal punishment in school has been associated with increased drop-out rates and lower academic scores. Then that child has more limited opportunities when entering the workforce, highlighting the long-term significance of corporal punishment in school (World Health Organization, 2021).

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT LEGISLATION

While research and professional organizations have agreed that corporal punishment is ineffective, current legislation does not match the sentiment. In 1977, the Supreme Court case on *Ingraham v. Wright* made the headlines. This court case was a class action court case due to alarming corporal punishment of multiple students at Drew Junior High School, in hopes of

ending corporal punishment in Dade County, Florida. Multiple boys at this school received fifty slaps with a wooden mallet by the administration due to incidents of skipping class and for inappropriate language. One student in particular, Daniel Lee, was asked to bend over a chair to receive a punishment for a crime he did not even know he had committed. When he asked administration to explain why he was receiving punishment, the administration paddled his hand with such extreme force that his right hand was fractured. This defendant wanted to enact the Eighth Amendment against "cruel and unusual punishment" in the school setting (Olsen, 1997).

The ruling determined that corporal punishment in the school setting does not infringe on the Constitutional rights of school-aged children. It was deemed that this section of the Eighth Amendment only applies to incarcerated individuals. The only conclusion this case brought forth was that corporal punishment could not be deemed excessive, and that definition was determined by each respective state. (Russo, 2008). This case could end corporal punishment within the school setting but instead gave vague definitions and allowed states to determine the definition of cruel and unusual punishment.

According to the National Education Association, 17 out of 50 states still legally allow corporal punishment in the school setting. These states include Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming. The states with the most documented cases of corporal punishment include Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas. However, in the states listed above, it has been discovered that fourteen states actively use corporal punishment as a form of discipline in school. An estimated 20,000 students in the 2021-2022 school year experienced corporal punishment in the school setting. Black students have been the target of

most corporal punishment. These students have an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and aggression (Greene-Santos, 2024).

ADVOCATING FOR LEGISLATION

As pediatric healthcare providers, there is a call to advocate for the end of corporal punishment in the school setting. Legislative action is the most effective way to end corporal punishment in schools. Policy provides protection. School corporal punishment is currently an issue in each state, but there is an opportunity to bring this issue to the national level. Representative Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon has highlighted this issue and brought it to the 119th Congress session. Her goal is to move the issue of corporal punishment to the federal level by writing and introducing the Protecting our Students in School Act. This Act aims to eliminate corporal punishment for all children in the school setting. It will support the states and local districts by enacting new behavioral models in federally funded schools. It will also provide training for school district employees on additional discipline methods. This program will also re-evaluate school programs to ensure that the interventions are effective. (Bonamici, 2025).

If the bill passes, this will give legal protection for the school-aged children of America. Federal funding for public education will be tied to school districts ending corporal punishment. On the other hand, the argument to maintain corporal punishment within the state law is that it is scarcely used in states where it is legal (Ward et al., 2021). If majority of states do not use corporal punishment, passing the Protecting Students in Schools Act will not cause any changes within the educational system. It will only provide legal protection for students across America.

In addition, this issue can be addressed locally and at the states level for states that still endorse corporal punishment in the school setting. Providers, especially located within the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and Texas, should consider contacting their local representatives regarding current policy and practices that are within the respected state. Providers may consider to work with educators to lobby for policy that reflects ending corporal punishment and providing educators resources for alternative behavior management.

CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT FOR ALTERNATE DISCIPLINE METHODS

In addition to legislative action, pediatric providers are responsible for educating caregivers on alternative disciplinary methods. All discipline begins at home, and the expectations of discipline are set by caregivers. A recent study showed that those not in favor of banning school corporal punishment included individuals older than 55 years old, men, Southerners, and those who personally experienced corporal punishment (Fleckman, Taylor, Gershoff, Finkelhor, Holden, and Klika, 2023). This helps providers identify children that are more at risk of corporal punishment. Providers are responsible for educating on alternative discipline methods that are more effective than corporal punishment.

The National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners has recommendations to help educate parents end corporal punishment include stopping the use of objects (belts, whips, and rulers) for corporal punishment, screening parents for disciplinary methods, using anticipatory guidance to educate about the harms of corporal punishment, and note that children with other conditions may need more discipline resources (NAPNAP Position Statement, 2022). The American Academy of Pediatrics suggest using replacing corporal punishment with different

age-appropriate and peaceful forms of behavior management. Providers can teach positive reinforcement, set clear boundaries, and redirecting inappropriate behavior (Allison et al., 2023). Educating parents empowers them to advocate for their child's discipline in other settings, such as in schools. **Table 1** includes resources for alternative behavior techniques.

CONCLUSION

Corporal punishment infringes on a child's individual human and civil rights. As a profession that advocates health and safety for children, there is an obligation to support federal policy to end corporal punishment in the school setting. The passing of the Protecting Our Students in School Act will be half the battle. As providers, we can also educate caregivers on effective discipline methods. Methods of discipline that have been shown effective are not corporal punishment including positive reinforcement, token economy, and praise. Parents and educators can prioritize creating meaningful bonds with the child to enforce better disciplinary measures (Qual & Ward, 2022). By implementing legislation and parent education, corporal punishment in the school setting can be eliminated in the United States. This will create a safe environment in the school setting that promotes learning and growth.

Table 1

Organization	**Link**	**Description**
American Academy of Pediatrics – Healthy Children	https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Disciplining-Your-Child.aspx	Provides alternate discipline strategies and age-appropriate discipline.
Canadian Paediatric Society	https://academic.oup.com/pch/article/9/1/37/2648475	Highlights the providers role in discussing discipline with families and how to give advice for age-appropriate discipline techniques.
Cleveland Clinic	https://health.clevelandclinic.org/discipline-top-dos-and-donts-when-your-kids-wont-listen	Reviews age-appropriate discipline methods and discipline for children who struggle with listening.
Emory University School of Medicine	https://med.emory.edu/departments/pediatrics/divisions/neonatology/dpc/alternatives-physical-punishment.html`	Discusses ways to create an environment for behavior expectations and how to respond to unwanted behavior.
Ohio Department of Education and Workforce	https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Safe-and-Supportive-Schools/Ohio-School-Discipline/Alternatives-to-Discipline	Provides educators and school systems alternate discipline methods and resources for teachers within the school setting.

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