
An Alternative to Spanking?

By Jordan Riak

A supervisor of a county children's protective service unit writes:

I have received a copy of *Plain Talk about Spanking* and I commend you for making this material available. The publication is attractive and the points are well argued. However, after staff had the opportunity to examine the publication, we have decided not to use it. Some of our staff expressed the concern that the over-all tone is too negative and accusatory and they could not possibly hand this pamphlet to certain clients. The consensus here is that we prefer to stress alternatives to spanking, and to show parents, in a positive way, the advantages of nonviolent methods of disciplining their children. If you decide at some future date to amend your publication to emphasize these points, we would certainly reconsider.

Variations of the above have arrived more than a few times.

The easy and obvious response to these criticisms would be to give customers what they are asking for--more sugar in the mix. Unfortunately, soothing answers are not necessarily the answers that are needed and being nice is not synonymous with being honest. Moreover, the market for child rearing information is already saturated with benign, user-friendly advice, and anyone genuinely searching for spank-free recipes can find them everywhere. I cannot understand why anybody should feel compelled to complain to me for not providing more of what already exists in overabundance. Perhaps it is not so much what I omit that bothers them, but rather what I include. The truth about spanking is unsettling to many and makes them hanker for a return to familiar, safer and more pleasant perspectives.

Some requesters of "alternatives" are disingenuous. They coyly sidestep the heart of the issue by launching a pointless discussion on the relative merits of one form of pain infliction compared to another, or they are merely fishing for corroboration of their own particular bad habits.

Perhaps I can better convey some sense of my irritation in this regard by substituting "wife" for "child" and "husband" for "parent" in what has become a familiar formula among the advocates of "alternatives to spanking." Suspend disbelief for a moment and consider the following:

We no longer favor physical chastisement of wives by their husbands. There are better ways to discipline. Whenever a wife misbehaves, her husband should calmly explain to her why her behavior is unacceptable, and request that she go to her room to think about it. When she settles down and decides she is ready to rejoin the family, she can come out. Ten minutes is usually enough.

While the preceding is a humane alternative to a punch in the eye, it completely sidesteps the possibility that it is the naughty husband who needs to be sent to his room. Likewise, most books on child rearing take for granted that it is the child's behavior, not the parent's, that needs correction. If the truth were told, fewer books would be sold.

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When I am asked for alternatives to spanking, my standard response is that there is only one honest alternative to spanking, just as there is only one honest alternative to spousal battery-- never to do it. Once that position is embraced, then it may be useful to peruse the literature and see what the experts suggest. Excellent authors such as Thomas Gordon, Penelope Leach and Irwin Hyman have much good advice for parents.

Lower down on the quality scale is a vast body of "feel-good" parenting literature. Generally, it is neither good nor bad, but merely confirms what reasonable parents are already doing, while being inoffensive to incompetents. Here, bed-side manner takes precedence over substance. At the bottom of the heap we find the truly toxic offerings of charlatans and profiteers who have learned how easy it is to enrich themselves by providing a product which is in enormous demand. Readers beware. These writers are very popular among parents of juvenile delinquents and runaways because they give them the validation they crave. They are popular among spankers because they ease their guilt and sense of failure.

Bringing up children is not something one can pick up from a recipe book. It isn't baking bread. Nor is it something that can be conveyed by unctuous slogans about Peace and Love fastened to the refrigerator door with magnetic hearts. And as "tough love" proponents prove over and over again to everyone but themselves, ramrod techniques inevitably backfire. How we treat our children is profoundly influenced by the treatment given us by our own parents. How we react to others (including our children) in moments of stress is profoundly influenced by the treatment we received and the models we observed and mimicked when we were little. If the significant caretakers in our formative years were patient, gentle and rational, we are the beneficiaries. These attributes will be part of the fabric of our makeup and determine to a large extent how we treat others. However, if they were irrational, impulse-ridden, cruel and dangerous, then we are among the least lucky, and we may need the help of others to overcome our bad start in life and to avoid a repetition with our children.

I doubt if the effects of these earliest influences can ever be completely erased. They are tenacious and logic-resistant. However, by honestly confronting the past, we can better deal with our quirks and private demons. Self-knowledge, often unflattering, sometimes painful, is the key to change and growth. We can learn to cultivate our better selves and guard against our defects-- particularly against those defects that cause pain and injury to those who love and depend on us. We can learn to anticipate the danger zones, and detour around them. As we learn to critically examine the shortcomings of our parents, we will begin to understand our own shortcomings. Forewarned, we will take steps to avoid a mindless repetition of history. We will come to recognize that every time we inflict misery on our children, we sabotage their mental health and ours. Every time we spank, we inject a little more poison into what could be, and should be, the most fruitful of human relationships. The short answer is: DON'T DO IT! Then tend to the details.