

AGGRESSION AND DELINQUENCY

By Philip Greven

From PART IV CONSEQUENCES, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990.

The most visible public outcome of early violence and coercion in the name of discipline is the active aggression that begins to shape the character and behavior in childhood and continues, in far too many instances, throughout the lives of those who suffered most in their earliest years. Aggressive children often become aggressive adults, who often produce more aggressive children, in a cycle that endures generation after generation. 174 Corporal punishments always figure prominently in the roots of adolescent and adult aggressiveness, especially in those manifestations that take antisocial form, such as delinquency and criminality. Assaults upon children by adults in the name of discipline are the primary familial models for aggression, assaults, and other forms of antisocial behavior, delinquency, and crime that emerge when children grow up.

Physical punishment of children consistently appears as one of the major influences shaping subsequent aggressiveness and delinquency of males. 175 The psychologists Ronald Slaby and Wendy Roedell in "The Development and Regulation of Aggression in Young Children," note that "one of the most reliable predictors of children's level of aggression is the heavy use by parents of harsh, punitive discipline and physical punishment." They add that "Parental punitiveness has been found to be positively correlated with children's aggression in over 25 studies. . .

One of the most massive long-term studies of delinquency's origins and etiology, began in 1940 by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, confirms the central role played by discipline and families in shaping of antisocial aggressiveness enacted in male delinquency and criminality in adolescence and adulthood. The Gluecks compared both delinquent and nondelinquent boys from English, Irish and Italian families in poor urban areas and discovered conclusive evidence that delinquency is rooted in early childhood experiences, discipline and family life being of paramount importance.

What the Gluecks prove is that delinquency begins long before children become adolescents; signs are often visible by the time children are between three and six, and almost always before they are eleven:

"The onset of persistent misbehavior tendencies was at the early age of seven years or younger among 48 per cent of our delinquents, and from eight to ten in an additional 39 per cent; thus a total of almost nine-tenths of the entire group showed clear delinquent tendencies before the time when boys generally become members of organized boys' gangs..." 178

The Gluecks continued their analysis of discipline in their major study "Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency" (1950) in which they assert: "All in all, the most marked difference between the disciplinary practices of the parents of the delinquents and those of the non-delinquents is found in the considerably greater extent to which the former resorted to physical punishment and the lesser extent to which they reasoned with the boys about their misconduct." The Gluecks believe their analysis "is a revealing commentary on the relative effectiveness of physical punishment as opposed to an appeal to reason in the control of child behavior. 184 . .

The lowest incidence of delinquency and antisocial behavior in adolescence and beyond is always found among males who were loved, respected, cared for and reasoned with in childhood. . .

The overwhelming evidence now available from scholarship on the roots of delinquency and crime suggests that corporal punishment -- the application of the rod and other implements of discipline -- is a major factor in generating the rage, aggression, and impulses for revenge that fuel the emotions, fantasies, and actions of individuals, mostly male, who become active delinquents or criminals. . .

NOTES

174. See, for instance, Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, and Walder, "Stability of Aggression over Time and Generations," and Monroe M. Lefkowitz, Leonard d. Eron, Leopold O. Walder, and L. Rowell Huesmann, *Growing up to be Violent: A longitudinal Study of the Development of Aggression* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1977), one of the few longitudinal studies yet done.

175. See James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), chapters 4 and 8.

178. Sheldon Glueck, "Ten Years of Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency: An Examination of Criticisms," in Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, *Ventures in Criminology: Collected Recent Papers* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1964), p.285.

184. Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1950), p. 133.

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