Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: A Continuing Challenge for School Social Workers

David R. Dupper and Amy E. Montgomery Dingus

Although corporal punishment has been banned in 29 states, more than a million cases of corporal punishment in U.S. schools continue to be reported annually, with states located in the southeastern and southwestern United States accounting for the vast majority of instances of corporal punishment. This article provides an overview of corporal punishment in U.S. public schools and includes a discussion of the influence of cultural and religious attitudes on the use of corporal punishment as a means of disciplining students. It offers several strategies designed to reduce the frequency of corporal punishment in general as well as strategies that specifically target those communities where strongly held religious and cultural beliefs reinforce the routine use of corporal punishment, and it calls on school social workers to advocate for effective alternatives to corporal punishment and to work to ban corporal punishment in those 21 states where it remains legal.

KEY WORDS: advocacy; corporal punishment; physical punishment; school discipline; social justice; vulnerable populations

orporal punishment is defined as "physical pain inflicted on the body of a child as a penalty for disapproved behavior" (NCACPS, 2002). Corporal punishment is intentional and includes a variety of methods, such as hitting, spanking, punching, shaking, paddling, shoving, and use of various objects, painful body postures, excessive exercise drills, and electric shock (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Many schools provide different "instruments" to administer corporal punishment, including paddles, leather straps, and switches. Injuries from corporal punishment may include (but are not limited to) welts, blood blisters, severe bruising, skin discolorations, hematomas, blood clots, and broken veins (Hyman, 1995). Currently, every industrialized country in the world prohibits corporal punishment, except in the outback regions of Australia and the United States (NCACPS, 2006b). Despite the fact that this practice is currently banned in 29 states (see Appendix A for list of states and dates), more than a million cases of corporal punishment in U.S. schools continue to be reported annually,

with researchers estimating the actual number to be between 2 and 3 million cases (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Approximately 15,000 students request medical treatment each year following instances of corporal punishment (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Studies have indicated that corporal punishment is meted out more frequently among boys in rural areas of the United States and among low-income children (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003) and that African American students are hit at a rate more than twice their proportion to the population (Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment, 2001).

Although corporal punishment remains legal in 21 states, it is important to note that it is practiced most frequently in states located in the southeastern and southwestern United States (Kennedy, 1995; NCACPS, 2006a). Specifically, corporal punishment is the second most frequent form of discipline in Oklahoma, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and New Mexico (Kennedy, 1995), and five states (Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama,

andTennessee) account for almost three-quarters of all the instances of corporal punishment in the United States (Center for Effective Discipline, 2007). Because the use of corporal punishment in schools is antithetical to the values of the social work profession (Costin, 1978), there is a need to reinvigorate efforts to ban this form of school discipline. Although some strategies used in the past to ban corporal punishment may still prove useful, there appears to be a need to reformulate strategies for banning this school practice in those remaining 21 states, with a particular focus on cultural and religious factors in those southeastern and southwestern states where it is used most frequently.

BRIEF HISTORY OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It was in the Victorian Era that the concept of in loco parentis was first recognized and implemented within the school setting and when the "historical perspective on corporal punishment and children began" (Parker-Jenkins, 1997, p. 4). Parents in the Victorian era considered insubordination and laziness as alienating oneself from God, and for this reason, teachers were considered to be in the ideal role for leading children away from ignorance and sin (Parker-Jenkins, 1997). The 18th century marked the first documented law regarding corporal punishment in schools (Conte, 2000). Meaning "in position or place of parent," in loco parentis is the legal doctrine in which teachers and other school officials assume the parental rights of a minor (Worley, 2003). The principle behind in loco parentis came from the English ideal of schools having educational and moral responsibility for children and was "imported to protect teachers who felt the need to administer corporal punishment to students" (Conte, 2000, p. 2). During this time parents expected teachers and administrators to simultaneously attend to the educational and moral welfare of their children and"physical chastisement was considered an excellent instrument for the correction of children" (Scott, 1938, p. 94). Corporal punishment was viewed as a necessary form of discipline for the following three reasons: (1) to produce people who would conform to accepted societal norms; (2) to "beat out the obstinacy" that was viewed as a syndrome of "original sin," and (3) to ensure that learning occurs (Parker-Jenkins, 1997, p. 4). The administration of corporal punishment is strongly tied to and based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, specifically Proverbs 23:13–14, which states the following: "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death."

EVENTS THAT LED TO THE BANNING OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The arrival of research on child development and Freudian psychiatry in the 1920s and 1930s "fundamentally changed the American approach to spanking" (Evans & Fargason, 1998, p. 361). These new movements explored the effect of spanking and other forms of corporal punishment on child development, and it was during this time that parents began to recognize the immeasurable impact of effective parenting on children (Evans & Fargason, 1998). The child development literature of the 1940s challenged the widespread public support for corporal punishment by suggesting that "many of the behavior problems that had warranted corporal punishment in the past were actually part of normal developmental stages" (Evans & Fargason, 1998, p. 363), and the pediatric literature during the 1940s acknowledged the "risks of corporal punishment due to ideas which emerged from the child developmental research" (Evans & Fargason, 1998, p. 363).

In the 1960s, literature on the "child maltreatment syndrome"—the general term used to describe all forms of child abuse and neglect—played a "substantial role in increasing pediatric and public awareness of the fine line between excessive physical discipline and child abuse" (Evans & Fargason, 1998, p. 365). Abuse was defined as the "non-accidental physical injury as a result of caretaker acts" (National Association of Counsel for Children, 2006, p. 1) and began to be considered a medical diagnostic category that required all doctors to report any suspected cases of abuse (Evans & Fargason, 1998). During this time, the pediatric literature began to define

corporal punishment as a "socially abnormal" form of discipline (Evans & Fargason, 1998, p. 365). The legal concept in loco parentis was also challenged during the 1960s as court systems began to consider the legal rights of students (Worley, 2003).

By 1972 only two states-Massachusetts and New Jersey-had already legally banned corporal punishment as a disciplinary method (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). In 1972 the American Civil Liberties Union sponsored a conference on corporal punishment (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Two years later, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution banning corporal punishment, and the National Education Association published a report denouncing corporal punishment and officially recommended that it be abolished from school systems (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). In 1975 the case of Ingraham v. Wright brought the issue of corporal punishment in schools to a legal and national level for the first time (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). In this landmark case, the U.S. Supreme Court considered whether students' constitutional rights were being violated and whether the act of "paddling" violated the Eighth Amendment right to be free from "cruel and unusual punishment" and whether paddling "violated the Fourteenth Amendment right to due process" (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003, p. 386). The Supreme Court denied both questions.

More formalized efforts to abolish the practice of corporal punishment emerged during the 1980s. In 1984 the NASW Delegate Assembly approved a policy opposing physical punishment in schools. In 1987 a formal organization called the National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools was developed (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003, p. 385). This organization gained support from a variety of other influential organizations, including the National Center on Child Abuse Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and many other groups committed to banning physical discipline in schools (see Table 1 for a complete listing of organizations) (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003).

DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

Since 1974 there has been an ongoing debate surrounding the effectiveness of using aversive disciplinary procedures to change human behavior (Hyman, 1995). Although some research findings indicate that the use of corporal punishment in schools has been associated with increased immediate compliance (Owen, 2005), there is no data demonstrating that the use of corporal punishment is associated with enhanced social skills or self-control skills over time (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). This is evidenced by the fact that the same students are hit over and over again (Teicher, 2005).

The use of corporal punishment in schools has been shown to be associated with damaging physical and psychological outcomes that can affect some children for the remainder of their lives (Hyman, 1995). For example, the excessive use of corporal punishment has been shown to be associated with conduct disorder in children and is comorbid with PTSD (Hyman, 1995). The humiliation that accompanies the experience of corporal punishment in schools may reduce a child's ability to problem solve rationally; make a child more aggressive, defiant, and oppositional; and further inhibit a child's ability to solve problems effectively (Hyman, 1995). Studies also indicate that preschool and school-age children who experience psychological maltreatment, such a corporal punishment, perform at lower levels (when compared with other children) in three domains: ability, academic achievement, and social competence (Hyman, 1995). These deficits further subject children to feelings of inadequacy and resentment and may eventually lead to anger, hostility, violence, and aggression against school property, peers, and authorities (Hyman & Perone, 1998).

The use of corporal punishment in schools has also been found to be associated with a host of other negative outcomes (Arcus, 2002). Specifically, higher rates of child abuse fatalities occur in states that allow corporal punishment in the schools, and students are more likely to die from school shootings in states where corporal punishment is used. States reporting the

highest rates of corporal punishment in schools were also the states with the highest number of youths awaiting capital punishment in the state judicial system (Arcus, 2002). It has also been reported that schools with high rates of corporal punishment have higher rates of student behavior problems (Hyman, 1995). Findings suggest that states with high rates of corporal punishment also tend to have higher rates of violence, aggression, and homicide committed by children (Hyman, 1995). Negative motivational techniques, such as corporal punishment, often increase student alienation, misbehavior, and desire to seek revenge (Hyman & Perone, 1998). Substantial research also indicates that "reward, praise, and interaction with children that promotes the development of a positive selfconcept," are the most compelling motivators for learning in school (Hyman, 1995, p. 119). Administering corporal punishment legitimizes the practice of violence by using violent means to solve behavior problems (Owen, 2005).

EFFECT OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

As stated earlier in this article, although corporal punishment remains legal in 21 states, only nine states (Oklahoma, Georgia, Florida, New Mexico, Texas, Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, and Tennessee), located in the southern and southwestern United States, routinely use corporal punishment as a means of disciplining students. In all of these states, conservative politics and religion are very important aspects of their culture. Adherence to evangelical protestant religious beliefs has been shown to significantly predict rates of corporal punishment in schools (Owen & Wagner, 2006). These southern and southwestern states practice a traditional, conservative, Evangelical Protestant religion, in which literal interpretations of the Bible are very common, and in which the Bible is often used to support and even demand that parents use corporal punishment on their children (NCACPS, 2002). The traditions of conservatism, order, and authority make it more likely that force will often be used to ensure appropriate behavior in children (Flynn, 1994). Studies also suggest

that there is a "positive association between the experience of being spanked and the acceptance of this disciplinary method" (Deater-Deckard, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2003, p. 357). This intergenerational transmission of attitudes surrounding physical discipline is an important factor in that most children form supportive attitudes about the parental use of physical discipline that are consistent with their own child-rearing experiences, and it makes it more likely that recipients of corporal punishment will adopt this discipline method later in life (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003).

In essence, discipline practices in schools reflect the values and beliefs of their surrounding communities, and openly challenging these values and beliefs may come at a high cost. This high cost is exemplified in the following quote by Nadine Block, executive director of the Center for Effective Discipline (personal communication, November 15, 2006), "Superintendents have told me that they would willingly get corporal punishment banned in their districts, but because it is favored so highly in their communities, it may mean losing their jobs."

THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AND CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

The social work profession has taken a strong stance against the use of corporal punishment in schools. Costin (1978), a renowned social work scholar and educator, was one of the earliest and most outspoken critics of corporal punishment. She stated that the use of corporal punishment in schools is "antithetical to the values of the social work profession [and that] school social workers should refuse to condone this practice and should inform themselves and their colleagues of the legal and moral rights of students" (p. 61). In 1984 NASW approved a policy that opposed physical punishment in schools. This policy states that NASW remains "[strongly opposed to corporal punishment as a method of discipline] in homes, school, and all other institutions, both public and private, where children are cared for and educated... [and that] the use of physical force against people, especially children, [is a child-rearing practice that] is antithetical to the best values of a democratic society and

of the social work profession" (NASW, 2006, p. 292). This policy statement notes that legal safeguards protect adults from being physically assaulted for violating rules; however, these legal protections are systematically denied for children (NASW, 2006). It calls on the social work profession, with its tradition of championing human rights, to join the effort to promote the nonviolent discipline and care of children in the United States and to favor legislation to ban corporal punishment and support programs that use "nonviolent disciplinary techniques, such as positive reinforcement, time-out, and verbal problem solving" (NASW, 2006, p. 292). However, the sensitivity of the social work profession toward all populations, religions, ethnicities, and diverse cultural backgrounds poses a difficult ethical dilemma in relation to the use of corporal punishment in schools. Specifically, how can social workers support actions and conditions that facilitate the healthy development of children and simultaneously respect cultural, religious, and ethnic preferences regarding child-rearing practices that run contrary to the healthy development of children and youths?

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

Several strategies can be generally applied to all schools and school districts that use corporal punishment as a method of discipline. Several additional strategies may be useful to reduce the frequency of this practice in those southern and southwestern states where corporal punishment continues to be widely used and where strongly held religious and cultural beliefs reinforce this practice.

These general strategies are as follows:

• Educating the general public and school personnel about the negative effects of corporal punishment—This strategy has historically resulted in greater public concern about this method of discipline and has led to the banning of corporal punishment in more than half of the states. Social workers should continue to educate school personnel and the general public about the negative effects of corporal

- punishment by using empirical research findings (such as those highlighted in this article). A useful resource can be found at http://www.stophitting.com/disatschool/argumentsAgainst.php
- Social workers becoming familiar with and advocating for empirically based, effective alternatives to corporal punishment in schools—These empirically based alternatives to corporal punishment include social skills training, character education programs, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, a proactive, data-driven set of problem-solving strategies designed to minimize or prevent problematic student behaviors (Price, 2007). Social skills training is "perhaps the most promising new treatment model" for students who are aggressive and disruptive (LeCroy, 2002, p. 411). Character education programs have been shown to be effective in enhancing prosocial behaviors in school settings (see http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ reports/character_education/). Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is a "systems approach to establishing the social culture and behavioral supports needed for all children in a school to achieve both social and academic success. SWPBS is not a packaged curriculum but is an approach that defines core elements that can be achieved through a variety of strategies" (Sugai & Horner, 2007, p. 2).

One of the central challenges in reducing the use of corporal punishment in those southern and southwestern states where it continues to be used with great frequency is how to offer effective counterarguments to those Evangelical Protestant religious beliefs that are linked to the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy in schools. It has been noted that because scientific evidence is not likely to influence or sway the opinions of individuals whose views about corporal punishment are linked to their religious beliefs (Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, & Bursick, 1992), arguments against the use of corporal punishment should be theological in nature (Bartkowski, 1996). The following strategy is based on this unique challenge:

Acknowledging the strongly held biblical basis for corporal punishment and offering religious-based counterarguments and religious foundations for the effective guidance of children without the use of corporal punishment—It is important to be sensitive to and respectful of strongly held religious beliefs because, when this occurs, the groups holding these beliefs are more likely to be receptive to the social worker's suggestions for change (Cole, 2006). Social workers should build relationships with clergy and other religious leaders in their communities (Cole, 2006). Religious leaders may be able to offer compelling counterarguments to the biblical basis for corporal punishment and to provide religious foundations for the effective guidance of children, without the use of corporal punishment. For example, some have argued that "spare the rod, spoil the child" is an unwise misinterpretation and misuse of scripture and that similar methods of interpretation could also be used to justify slavery, suppression of women, and polygamy (NCACPS, 2002). The United Methodist Church's resolution against corporal punishment states that corporal punishment "is humiliating and degrading to children and sometimes causes physical injury...it sends a message that hitting smaller and weaker people is acceptable...there are effective alternatives to corporal punishment that teach children to be self disciplined rather than to submit out of fear" (See http://www.stophitting. com/religion/unitedmethodist.php to view this resolution in its entirety and for summaries of other religious counterarguments.)

A long-term goal is to engage in activities that ultimately result in the banning of corporal

punishment in the 21 states where it is a legal form of discipline. Over the past several decades, several grassroots and legislative strategies have been used by child advocates and advocacy organizations to ban corporal punishment at the state level. These strategies have ranged from educating the public, to supporting nonviolent forms of discipline, to advocating for children's rights, to motivating others with similar goals to join the national effort to ban corporal punishment within U.S. public schools. In addition to the Center for Effective Discipline (www. stophitting.com), the NCACPS Web site contains numerous links, including those to current statistical data on corporal punishment by state and race, corporal punishment policies in the largest 100 U.S. school districts, legislative and grassroots strategies to ban corporal punishment in schools, and pointers on forming coalitions to abolish corporal punishment in a school or state.

CONCLUSION

Social workers are called on to protect vulnerable populations, including children. The social work profession, along with 46 other organizations (see Appendix B for complete list of these organizations), has developed a policy statement that opposes the use of corporal punishment. Although adults are legally protected from being physically harmed for violating rules, these legal protections do not currently extend to children in school settings in 21 states. Banning corporal punishment is a particular challenge in those southern and southwestern states where it continues to be used with great frequency. It is time for social workers to renew their efforts in advocating for effective alternatives to corporal punishment and to work to ban this dehumanizing school discipline practice in those 21 states where it remains legal. We hope that this article provides some useful knowledge and tools for undertaking this important challenge.

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David R. Dupper, PhD, is associate professor, College of Social Work, University of Tennessee, 208 Henson Hall, Knoxville, TN; e-mail: ddupper@utk.edu. Amy E. Montgomery Dingus, CMSW, is a criminal justice-mental health liaison, Mental Health Cooperative, Nashville, TN. Please address all correspondence regarding this article to Dr. Dupper.

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APPENDIX A: STATES THAT HAVE BANNED CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

State	Year Banned	State	Year Banned
New Jersey	1967	Minnesota	1989
Massachusetts	1971	North Dakota	1989
Hawaii	1973	Oregon	1989
Maine	1975	Virginia	1989
Rhode Island	1977	South Dakota	1990
New Hampshire	1983	Montana	1991
New York	1985	Illinois	1993
Vermont	1985	Maryland	1993
California	1986	Nevada	1993
Nebraska	1988	Washington	1993
Wisconsin	1988	West Virginia	1994
Alaska	1989	Delaware	2003
Connecticut	1989	Pennsylvania	2005
Iowa	1989	Utah	2006
Michigan	1989		

APPENDIX B: ORGANIZATIONS THAT HELPED TO DEVELOP A POLICY STATEMENT OPPOSING THE USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association of Counseling and Development

American Association for Protecting Children

American of School Administrators

American Bar Association

American Civil Liberties Union

American Humane Association

American Medical Association

American Orthopsychiatric Association

American Personnel and Guidance Association

American Public Health Association

American Psychological Association

American Psychiatric Association

Americans for Democratic Action

American School Counselor Association

American School Counselor Association

Association for Childhood Education International

Association for Humanistic Education

Association of Junior Leagues

Association for State Departments of Education

Child Welfare League of America

Council for Exceptional Children

Defense for Children International-USA

Friends Committee on Legislation

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Association of School Psychologists

National Association of Social Workers

National Committee for Citizens in Education

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse

National Council of Teachers of English

National Education Association

National Foster Parents Association

National Indian Education Association

National Mental Health Association

United Methodist Church General Assembly

National Parent Teachers Association

National Women's Political Caucus

Society for Adolescent Medicine

Unitarian Universalist General Assembly

National Organization for Women

U.S. Department of Defense: Office of Dependents Schools

Overseas

National Association of State Boards of Education

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National Association of School Nurses

National Association for the Education of Young Children

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

International Society for the Study of Dissociation

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