

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Correspondents: B. F. Skinner
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Corporal Punishment

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Editor:

My attention has been called to your issue of April 1973 in which, on p. 595, the authors of an article¹ say that corporal punishment reflects my philosophy. Could I ask you to publish a correction? I am absolutely opposed to the use of corporal punishment in education. Dr. Estes' report of the results of a conference with me has been widely misunderstood. I believe what he wished to say was that after considering my views on corporal punishment he and his staff decided that my views were too Utopian and they therefore went on with their established practice.

What I said at an open meeting arranged by Dr. Estes was the following: I do not believe corporal punishment is necessary in education and I think every effort should be made to abandon it. I do recognize the difficulty in converting from a punitive system to one involving positive reinforcement. Mere permissiveness is not an alternative

¹ Samuel N. Francis and Emma Jane Hirschberger. "Corporal Punishment in School: 1973." *Educational Leadership* 30 (7): 591-95; April 1973.

philosophy. I did not wish to imply that corporal punishment should be continued. I was referring to other punitive sanctions such as loss of privileges and failure. I believe that recent developments in classroom practices and in the design of instructional materials point the way quite clearly toward an educational environment in which no form of punishment will be needed.

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Dear Editor:

The article, "Corporal Punishment in School: 1973," which recently appeared in your journal,² seems to be an example of telling half the story. A companion article pointing out some of the moral and emotional overtones involved in corporal punishment should have been included.

In state institutions, such as the Lancaster Youth Development Center at Tren-

² *Ibid.*

ton, Florida, the use of corporal punishment is prohibited. The school-age youth population in that institution includes those convicted of arson, theft, and murder.

It seems that, in a day when youngsters who break the law are not allowed to have corporal punishment inflicted on them, it is time to reexamine some of the practices in the public schools. To our knowledge the public school is the only remaining place in the country where corporal punishment is allowed. It is appalling that the beating of school-age children is legal when beating prisoners, military personnel, employees, or inmates of institutions is not.³

Corporal punishment has been banned in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Maryland. The cities of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, St. Paul, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., have also done away with it in their schools.⁴ A recent article in *Ladies' Home Journal* said that Pittsburgh and Grosse Pointe, Michigan, had also outlawed corporal punishment.⁵ Hopefully, sometime soon the suggestion of the NEA Task Force to ban corporal punishment in the schools will be heeded.⁶

It is incompatible that teachers spend their time in education classes learning about child development and principles of learning such as "a child needs to be involved, interested, and concerned with school," and then go out and paddle the daylights out of the first dissenter they meet. If one practices what he is taught about aggression breeding aggression and "might *not* making right," how does he reconcile corporal punishment with his beliefs?

William Purkey, in his book *Self-Concept and School Achievement*, points out rather conclusively that corporal punishment is a very poor control procedure.⁷ It certainly

³ "It's Time To Hang Up the Hickory Stick." *Nation's Schools* 90: 9; November 1972.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵ Bernard Bard. "Should Teachers Spank Kids?" *Ladies' Home Journal* 90: 78; March 1973.

⁶ "It's Time To Hang Up the Hickory Stick," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷ William W. Purkey. *Self-Concept and School Achievement*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. p. 55.

does not enhance a student's view of self, either!

The old idea of "in loco parentis" does not hold up when one considers the number of parents who *do not* inflict corporal punishment on their children. In these cases, parents would delegate authority only to reason with a child—not to punish him physically.

In an article in *The Clearing House*, Brown quotes a justice of the Supreme Court as saying "Whatever may be their precise impact, neither the Fourteenth Amendment nor the Bill of Rights is for adults alone. . . . Under our Constitution, the condition of being a boy does not justify a kangaroo court."⁸ No adult, male or female, would stand for corporal punishment's being inflicted for not doing a certain job or having a wrong attitude, and it is time to see to it that our children are *not* subjected to it either.

From personal experience as a teacher and parent, we feel that the schools in which the most paddling is done are not regarded as "law and order" schools by the community. They are not even admired as institutions of learning. We have observed that it is *not* the 6'2" football player in high school who is paddled. Why is corporal punishment needed as a control procedure only for students who are smaller than the teacher?

If a state agency, working with the most incorrigible youngsters, does not use corporal punishment (and neither do our prisons), then it seems rather odd that certain public schools concerned with "normal" children feel corporal punishment is necessary. Does a child have to steal a car or kill someone before he can be treated with respect, love, and warmth?

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⁸ Joan G. Brown. "Law and Punishment—Status of State Statutes." *The Clearing House* 46: 108; October 1971.

Innovation and the Teacher

Flushing, New York

Dear Editor:

I would like to add to Harold Shane's listing of factors that have worked against school innovation, which he describes in his excellent editorial, "The 'Drop-Out Problem' in Educational Innovation."¹ My own list deals solely with factors influencing teachers.

1. Many teachers remain uninformed about educational reforms. For those who keep abreast of educational literature, the quantity of print describing new trends and programs seems gigantic, but my experience with teachers convinces me that a hefty portion are superficially informed, if at all. Many simply do not read.

2. Many schools have no money for new programs, an insurmountable obstacle for many teachers.

3. Teachers are not given sufficient incentives to innovate. In the typical school situation, the classroom teacher who attempts to innovate will receive nothing from the school district for his efforts: no extra money, no gain in title or rank, no official recognition, and no relief from extra work. Further, the classroom

teacher is likely to be subjected to pressure from peers not to innovate.

4. Teacher autonomy permits choice. This is the despair of zealot reformers, but who is to say it should be changed? The fact is that many teachers are unimpressed by the various educational reform movements. Some resistance can be charged to lethargy, of course, but at the same time many teachers honestly feel that what they are doing now is superior to what is being urged upon them. The resistance of many elementary teachers to the new math is a premier example.

The foregoing restraints notwithstanding, there are some incentives. First, there is the personal satisfaction that comes from professional growth. Second, there is the incentive of providing a better educational experience for one's students. Third, school administrators may often offer praise and encouragement to innovative teachers even though the school district may have no formal mechanism for supplying recognition. And last, the approval a teacher is likely to get from some of his peers for his innovative efforts will tend to counterbalance the disapproval of others.

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¹ "The 'Drop-Out Problem' in Educational Innovation." *Educational Leadership* 30 (6): 507-509; March 1973.

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