

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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USE OF CORPOREAL PUNISHMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Definition & Rationale

Corporal punishment simply means the use of whipping or beating as a means of achieving discipline and control. The idea of “whipping” or “beating” may sound *harsh* and even *barbaric* to moderns who perceive themselves to be “enlightened” and “refined.” But the proper use of corporal punishment—something appropriate, controlled, and reasonable—is an ancient and proven method of effective discipline. “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who lives him is careful to discipline him. . . . Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him. . . . Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. . . . The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.” [Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13; 29:15, *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985)].

Care is to be taken, so that children are not “exasperated” by such a disciplinary process. The guideline is “do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.” [Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21; *New International Version*]. Such care means that corporal punishment is *appropriate, controlled, and reasonable*. It is not for infants nor small children. It is for severe not minor offences. It is for obstinate and stubborn children, not deficient nor inept children. It is *appropriate*. It is done with an *objective* “rod” such as a wooden paddle or a switch, not with the hand or foot. It is done with limited force and *always* with verbal instruction and moral

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explanation. It is *never* done in anger. It is *controlled*. It is not for first offences unless very serious, and the punishment should fit the offence. It is *reasonable*.

Improper corporeal punishment can be very damaging, but proper corporeal punishment can be quite effective and an excellent tool for discipline. Corporeal punishment hurts! The pain reminds the child or student of the severe consequences of wrong behavior. This functions as a deterrent, albeit a negative deterrent. A lot of educators abhor negative motivation, but as human nature can be inclined toward aberrant behavior, negative motivation is realistic and necessary in some situations.

Above all, discipline is a function of love. “Do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” [Hebrews 12:5-6; *New International Version*]. Just as parents act in place of the Lord in this matter of discipline of children, so school officials act as an extension of the home when they discipline students. In all circumstances, true discipline is born of *intimate* and *caring relationships*. Therefore, it is very important for school officials to have parental permission to carry out corporeal punishment in the public schools.

Modification For A Pluralistic Environment

I have espoused a religious viewpoint for believing corporeal punishment to be valid and useful. Although this may be appropriate reasoning for private schools and personal settings, the question of the validity of such thinking for nonreligious public schools is important. As an individual educator, I can always cherish religious beliefs as the foundation of who I am, why I

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think the way I do, and why I would agree or disagree with a particular course of action, policy, or statute. I must do this, otherwise I would not be true to who I am as a person. I must, however, also respect plurality in society and the schools. Not everyone thinks the way that I do, especially on corporeal punishment. The bottom line is that I must yield to the common good, for example, what is defined as the norm for a region, state, or district by its particular authorities. If the state or local district says no corporeal punishment, then there will be no corporeal punishment. If yes, then it is defined, controlled, and occasionally used. I may feel compelled to argue for corporeal punishment on moral or religious grounds, or to use it as a deterrent, but generally the use or nonuse of corporeal punishment in nonreligious public schools will be based on other reasons, that is, pragmatism, community values, or psychological studies that may or may not have a basis in religious teaching and practice.