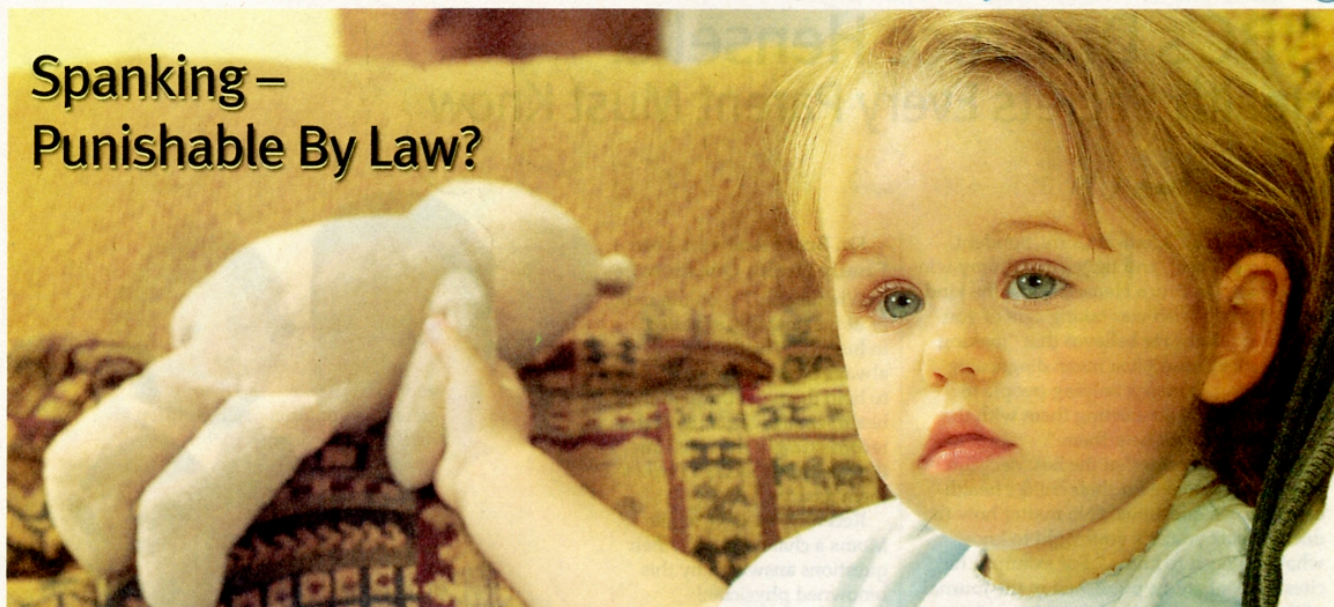


## Spanking – Punishable By Law?



by Dr. Jenn Berman

**E**arly this year California Assemblywoman Sally Lieber proposed a bill which would make spanking a child younger than three years old a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail or a fine of up to \$1,000. Whether or not this controversial proposal will become a bill or if a bill like that would pass is debatable but the good news is that it has opened the door for a national discussion about the merits, or lack thereof, of spanking young children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a statement saying that they "strongly oppose striking a child" and that spanking is "the least effective way to discipline a child." Most therapists seem to agree with that stance.

### Why Toddlers are So Tough to Discipline

Developmentally speaking, toddlers are at a stage where their primary task is to individuate, or develop independence. At that age they naturally feel the urge to do things for themselves and separate from their parents more frequently (but with the ability to come right back), to try new tasks unassisted and to test their ability to use the word "no." This new found desire for independent action and decision making runs counter to their ability to think through tasks, which is quite under-developed at this stage, making them impulsive. They have strong emotions but don't yet have the tools to express them and, as a result, tantrums are normal and expected at this age, even for the best of kids.

### To Spank or Not to Spank

There are many problems with using spanking as a disciplinary tactic. Spanking children teaches them it is okay to hit and that hitting is an acceptable means of resolv-

ing conflict. It is hypocritical to tell little Billy it is not okay to hit his sister and then spank him because he did. It teaches children that it is okay to hit the people they love, which is a message that has the potential to cause long term harm for your child's future intimate relationships. Experiencing pain does not teach a child to develop a conscience. While the pain or shock of a spanking has the potential to extinguish bad behavior in the moment, it has no long term positive effect. Hurting a child does not teach a child to respect a parent only to fear him or her. For a child to behave well he or she needs to feel a sense of trust and security. Spanking contradicts those goals.

### What Else is a Good Parent to Do?

Parents who want to avoid escalating a bad situation to the point where they are tempted to spank their children can do a few things preventively. For starters, have clear and consistent boundaries. Children who know what to expect tend to act out less frequently. Children who have consistent routines and schedules along with firm bedtimes tend to function better. One of the most important things a parent can do to avoid meltdowns is to avoid putting children in situations for which they are not developmentally ready. In other words, don't bring your child to a nice restaurant and expect him to sit quietly for two hours. Don't bring your child to the supermarket the day before Thanksgiving and then get upset when she starts getting cranky after standing in the checkout line for an hour.

There are many other effective ways to get the message across to a child:

- 1) Use a firm voice and facial expression.

Make sure your child knows you are serious.

- 2) Take your child out of the situation. If little Hannah throws a tantrum at a play date you need to remove her from the situation and take her home, even if you want to stay.

- 3) Remove the offending object or toy from the child. If little Jack is hitting the toy soldier against the wall it is time to take the toy away.

- 4) Redirect your child's attention. If you see that your child is getting cranky at the supermarket enlist her help. Ask her if she thinks you should get this shampoo or that one or ask her to count all of the men with mustaches. Distraction techniques are very effective with toddlers if they are used before a tantrum hits.

- 5) Discipline must occur at time of action, not an hour later. Any punishment that is employed must be done immediately for it to be effective. Toddlers don't have the ability to connect cause and effect unless it is done immediately.

- 6) Time outs are a great tool for older kids. Time outs give children the opportunity to calm down, which is an important skill for anyone to learn. Children two years of age or younger should never be given a time out for more than one minute and should be watched the entire time. Most experts recommend for children three and older to have one minute of time out for each year of age. The biggest mistake most parents make with time outs is sending their children to their rooms. Most children have toys, computers and televisions in their rooms, so sending a child to his or her room to play is hardly an effective disciplinary tool.