Spanking

Between the thrashing much in vogue in Dickensian novels to today’s fashion of no corporal punishment at all, there is a whole range of schools of thought or personal opinions on whether to touch a child or not when a parent wishes to express dissatisfaction at the child’s behavior.

Let us first examine the concept of punishment, or what is called today “consequence”. What should be the goal of such a process? The obvious answer would be, to teach the child not to repeat a certain behavior – such as lying -- or non-behavior, such as not doing homework. How does a parent go about teaching these?

One way is repeating the instruction, something otherwise known as nagging. “Brush your teeth, brush your teeth, brush your teeth,” just about a few hundred or thousand times, until that behavior has been learnt. This method is time consuming but eventually works. The problem is that it does not apply to all behaviors. “Don’t cross the street when the pedestrian lights are red.” Any loving parent will not allow the child to try a few hundred times before letting him cross the street on his own. The very first time he tries to cross the street while the lights are still red, you need to give him a very strong reminder that he should not do so. And that reminder had better work!

So here we are: what “reminder”, “consequence”, or “punishment” will work? If a speeding car just missed swiping your child, you are certainly not tempted to give him the chance to explain that he knew how to avoid it. Many parents will fall into the time-honored practice of “spanking”, which consists of delivering a few loud slaps to the fleshiest part of the body. The question which begs to be asked is: “Does it work? Will this child stop rushing through intersections next time?” Well, to use a personal example, yes in my case. I was maybe 4 or 5, and was skipping and hopping ahead of my mother and sister on our way to school. I stepped into the intersection, only to realize a few steps later that cars were coming my way. I ran as fast as possible and made it in one piece to the other side. Whew! Which is when a policeman who had been standing there and who had witnessed the whole episode grabbed me and delivered a few strokes of his white baton (this was a French policeman) on my rear. I do know that I have not done it again. Was it due to the “consequence”? I don’t really know, except that the memory of it is still very fresh in my mind half a century later.

The main reason for opposing spanking is the assumption that it is done by an angry adult who might inadvertently harm the child. Another reason is psychological. I remember reading in some pop-psychology magazine article many years ago something like this: “The only thing you will teach your child when you “lose it” and spank him is that you will give him a ticket to a first-row seat of a show of adult hysteria.”

That sentence haunted me every time I was tempted to spank my child. Indeed, I noticed that those episodes of a screaming adult never achieved the goal of stopping a certain behavior. Eventually, after much reading and searching, I finally hit on the perfect way to spank. When I applied it, it worked. Every time. This is how it works.

Firstly, you must lay the rules clearly prior to applying any system of consequence. If you never told the child she is not to lie, and if you never defined or explained what lying is, then you should not apply a consequence. That would simply send the message that adults can roar and thunder any time, and invent reasons for punishing you out of the blue, and the world is a frightening place since you never know whether a behavior is right or wrong.

Secondly, if the child does cross the line, then, you are to calmly, matter-of-factly ask him, “Did you cut down the cherry tree?” And if you have been in the habit of not exploding on him, he will not be scared into lying. He will answer just as calmly, “Yes, Father, I did cut down the cherry tree.” Then you are to calmly ask him, “Did I tell you not to do so? That it was my favorite tree?” And he will just as calmly answer you, “Yes, Father, you did.” Then you will ask him, “George, what did we agree on would be the consequence for cutting down the cherry tree?” He will then answer very calmly, “We agreed that you would use the switch on my behind for 3 strokes (or whatever). And, Father, I agree that you should carry it out. I did go against your instructions. I deserve it.” You will then ask him, “So, when would you like us to do this?” And he will say, “Well, now is as good a time as any. Let’s get it over with.” Now you can well imagine that there will be no need to use undue force when administering the spanking. The idea is to carry out a pre-agreed upon consequence. Very often, the child will cry not from the pain (since you are calm, you might just slightly slap it on) but from the simple idea that their parent is disappointed with them.

Having said that, it is obvious that since the idea is not to give physical pain, any non-corporal punishment can then be substituted to spanking. But that is a different topic altogether.