

# KWAME NKURUMAH UNIVERSITY



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## **An Argument Against Corporal Punishment in Disciplinary Settings**

### **Introduction**

Corporal punishment, defined as the physical disciplining of individuals, has long been a method used in both educational and domestic settings. However, a growing body of research and social opinion increasingly points to the negative effects of corporal punishment, arguing that it leads to psychological harm, promotes violence, and undermines respectful relationships between authority figures and children. This paper argues against corporal punishment, citing practical examples, quotes from authorities, and research findings that reveal its harmful effects on individual well-being and societal health.

### **Historical Perspective and Changing Attitudes**

For centuries, corporal punishment was widely accepted as a method of discipline. In ancient Rome, corporal punishment was commonly practiced as a means to enforce obedience. Similarly, in Victorian England, physical punishment in schools and homes was a norm, believed to cultivate obedience and respect. John Locke, an influential philosopher, however, began to question this norm as early as the 17th century. Locke (1693), *The rod and ferule are more fit for beasts than men, and such as need them are not fit to be governed by reason.* Locke's criticism marked an early questioning of the moral basis for corporal punishment.

By the mid-20th century, attitudes began to shift significantly. Studies emerging in the 1950s and 60s linked corporal punishment to negative psychological outcomes, leading countries like Sweden to begin banning corporal punishment in 1979. This trend continued globally, with over 60 countries having banned corporal punishment in schools and homes by 2020, reflecting a growing consensus that physical punishment is harmful.

### **Psychological Harm and Negative Behavioral Outcomes**

One of the strongest arguments against corporal punishment is its psychological impact. Numerous studies indicate that corporal punishment can lead to increased aggression, antisocial behavior, and long-term mental health issues in children. A landmark study by Dr. Elizabeth Gershoff in 2002 found a significant correlation between corporal punishment and behavioral problems. Gershoff (2002), *Physical punishment is associated with more aggressive behavior in children, not less.*

Further evidence emerged from a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2018, which concluded that corporal punishment contributes to anxiety, depression, and diminished cognitive development. Dr. Robert D. Sege, a co-author of the AAP study (2018),

The evidence against corporal punishment is overwhelming. It does not improve behavior over the long term and is associated with increased aggression. Such findings highlight that physical punishment may achieve short-term compliance but fails to encourage meaningful behavioral changes, often resulting in increased aggression and emotional instability.

### **Practical Examples of Corporal Punishment's Negative Effects in Schools**

Corporal punishment is still practiced in schools in certain parts of the United States, despite growing evidence of its harm. A well-documented case occurred in Texas in 2012, when a high school student was paddled by an administrator as punishment for a minor infraction. The incident resulted in visible bruising, causing widespread media attention and public outcry. This case illustrates the risks of physical punishment leading to unintended injury and emotional distress. Parents in the community voiced their concern, with one parent stating, "Physical punishment in schools only teaches our children to accept violence as normal".

In contrast, states that have banned corporal punishment in schools have seen positive behavioral outcomes. For instance, in 2011, after North Carolina banned corporal punishment in public schools, the state reported a decrease in behavioral incidents and improved student-teacher relationships. According to *The Charlotte Observer*, teachers noted a "more respectful environment," and students expressed feeling safer in classrooms free from physical punishment.

### **The Impact of Corporal Punishment in the Home**

Research shows that corporal punishment in the home is equally problematic, as it teaches children that violence is an acceptable response to frustration. Dr. Murray Straus, a prominent researcher on family violence, conducted extensive studies on corporal punishment and found that children who are physically disciplined are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior as adults. Dr. Murray Straus (1994), Hitting a child to correct behavior sends the message that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict. His findings highlight the cyclical nature of violence, suggesting that corporal punishment perpetuates aggression across generations.

Moreover, corporal punishment is linked to feelings of fear and resentment, which can erode trust between children and their parents. In a 2010 interview with *The New York Times*, a parent described how hitting their child led to a "breakdown in communication," noting that their child became more withdrawn and secretive. This is supported by research from Dr. Gershoff (2016), corporal punishment often breaks the bond of trust between parent and child, making effective discipline even more difficult. These examples underscore how physical discipline can strain family relationships, leading to long-term harm rather than healthy behavior correction.

### **Case Studies and International Responses to Corporal Punishment**

The detrimental effects of corporal punishment have led numerous countries to ban the practice entirely, demonstrating a global movement against physical discipline. In 1979, Sweden became the first country to prohibit corporal punishment in both schools and homes, setting a precedent for other nations. Since the ban, Sweden has seen a dramatic decrease in youth crime and delinquency. According to a 2009 report from UNICEF, “Sweden’s ban on corporal punishment has contributed to a generation of children who are less violent and more respectful of authority.”

Other countries have followed suit, citing Sweden’s success. For example, Germany banned corporal punishment in 2000, with officials reporting positive changes in children’s behavior. A German official from the Ministry of Family Affairs commented, “We no longer see corporal punishment as a means to correct behavior but as a form of abuse”. These international examples highlight how societies benefit when children are raised in environments free from violence, fostering respect and cooperation rather than fear and aggression.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, corporal punishment presents numerous risks to children’s physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. Research shows that physical discipline not only fails to create long-lasting behavioral change but often leads to increased aggression, fear, and damaged relationships. Historical examples illustrate that, although corporal punishment was once widely accepted, modern understanding reveals it to be a harmful and ineffective disciplinary method. As more countries and states abandon corporal punishment in favor of nonviolent approaches, evidence continues to mount that alternative forms of discipline are both more humane and more effective. Ultimately, ending corporal punishment reflects a commitment to raising children in a manner that promotes respect, empathy, and nonviolence, ensuring a healthier future for individuals and society alike.

## References

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