



CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

AAFP Position

The American Academy of Family Physicians [opposes](#) corporal punishment in schools, defined as the purposeful infliction of bodily pain or discomfort by an official in the education system upon a student as a penalty for disapproved behavior. Evidence shows that corporal punishment is not as effective as other means of behavior management and can make behavior worse. The Academy [calls for](#) an end to corporal punishment of children and recognizes that positive reinforcement and alternative methods of behavior management and modification are effective and contribute to a student's optimal learning.

The Negative Consequences of Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment can be inflicted upon students for nearly any infraction, including tardiness, using the restroom without asking permission, running in the hallway, failing to turn in homework or performing poorly on assignments, talking out of turn, using a cellphone, talking in class, and more.¹ The use of corporal punishment has no proven effect at improving students' behavior, and consensus among researchers and medical professionals is that corporal punishment is actually harmful to children – especially those who have experienced [abuse, trauma, and neglect](#).¹ Not only does corporal punishment fail to teach students social, emotional, and behavioral skills, it also contributes to physical injury, lower academic success, increased absenteeism from school, increased bullying, and behavioral and mental health challenges. The use of corporal punishment in schools also damages student-teacher relationships.¹

Corporal punishment is also proven to disproportionately affect boys, Black students, and students with disabilities.² According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Black boys were almost twice as likely to be struck than White boys and Black girls were more than three times as likely to be struck than White girls.¹ Moreover, in over half of the schools that practice corporal punishment, students with disabilities were struck at higher rates than those without disabilities – in some areas, over five times more likely.³ Students with disabilities make up 19 percent of those who receive corporal punishment but represent only 14 percent of students nationwide.⁴ Among families interviewed by the American Civil Liberties Union, students with disabilities were routinely punished at school for behaviors related to their disability, including Tourette syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder, and autism. In some cases of children with autism, episodes of corporal punishment preceded developmental regression.³

Federal Action

Corporal punishment is lawful in the home in all states and there is no federal prohibition of corporal punishment in public or private schools. The United States Supreme Court set a precedent for corporal

¹ The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, Southern Poverty Law Center. (2019). "The Striking Outlier – The Persistent, Painful, and Problematic Practice of Corporal Punishment in Schools." Web.

² United States Government Accountability Office. (2018). "K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities." Web.

³ Gershoff ET, Font SA. (2018). "Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools: Prevalence, Disparities in Use, and Status in State and Federal Policy." *Soc Policy Rep*. Web.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, American Civil Liberties Union. (2009). "Impairing Education – Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities in US Public Schools." Web.

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punishment in the 1975 [Baker v. Owen](#) ruling, which allowed schools to use corporal punishment on students, even against the wishes of the parents. Additional protections were granted in the 1977 Supreme Court case [Ingraham v. Wright](#), when the court ruled that the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, did not apply to school students, allowing teachers to punish children without permission from parents or guardians.

In recent years, legislators have attempted to end corporal punishment in schools by introducing the [Ending Corporal Punishment in Schools Act](#), which would make funds unavailable to schools that allow corporal punishment. Though it has not advanced, this legislation would end the use of corporal punishment in schools, including paddling, spanking, or other forms of physical punishment. Similarly, the [Ending PUSHOUT Act](#) would establish new federal grants to support states and districts that commit to ban unfair and discriminatory school discipline practices, including corporal punishment.

State Action

While 45 percent of schools that allow corporal punishment do not practice it, it is still legal at public and private schools in 19 states (AL, AZ, AR, CO, FL, GA, ID, IN, KS, KY, LA, MS, MO, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, WY).⁵ Ten southern states (MS, AR, MO, AL, OK, GA, TX, TN, FL, LA) account for over three quarters of all corporal punishment incidents reported in public schools. More than 70 percent of all corporal punishment incidents reported in the U.S. occurred in Mississippi alone, including almost half of all incidents of Black girls receiving corporal punishment.⁶

In schools that do allow corporal punishment, the rules and regulations can vary widely and may include the number of strikes a student can receive and which instruments may be used, which school personnel have authority to administer punishment, and liability protections for those individuals. For example, [Texas](#) defines corporal punishment as “hitting, paddling, spanking, slapping, or any other physical force.” [Wyoming](#) exempts school personnel from liability under child abuse laws. No school district in [North Carolina](#) allows corporal punishment, although the practice is permitted under state law. [Tennessee](#) and [Louisiana](#) recently passed laws banning paddling of students with disabilities.⁷ While some districts may allow parents to opt their child out of corporal punishment, the request is sometimes ignored or disregarded, making this an inadequate solution for parents opposed to the practice.⁸ The remaining 31 states (AK, CA, CT, DE, HI, IL, IA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MT, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, ND, OH, OR, PA, RI, SD, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV, WI) and DC made the practice unlawful in all public schools, with [Iowa](#) and [New Jersey](#) as the only states to ban it in both public and private schools.⁹

Alternatives and Model Practices

Advocates support banning corporal punishment in all schools and recommend avoiding replacing it with suspension from school or other punitive measures that deprive students of education. Alternative measures of mentoring, conflict resolution, peer mediation, and [restorative justice](#) are all proven to reduce physical violence, increase student cooperation, and lower suspension and expulsion rates by teaching students how to effectively handle conflict.¹⁰ Initiatives such as [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#) (PBIS) and [No Hit Zones](#) are research-based methods designed to work toward better methods of child discipline in schools and health care settings.

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⁵ Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. (2020). “Corporal punishment of children in the USA.” Web.

⁶ The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, Southern Poverty Law Center. (2019). “The Striking Outlier – The Persistent, Painful, and Problematic Practice of Corporal Punishment in Schools.” Web.

⁷ LeBlanc SS, Alexander R, Mastrangelo M, Gilbert H. (2019). “No Hit Zones: A Simple Solution to Address the Most Prevalent Risk Factor in Child Abuse.” *APSAC Advisor*. Web.

⁸ The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, Southern Poverty Law Center. (2019). “The Striking Outlier – The Persistent, Painful, and Problematic Practice of Corporal Punishment in Schools.” Web.

⁹ Human Rights Watch, American Civil Liberties Union. (2009). “Impairing Education – Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities in US Public Schools.” Web.

¹⁰ The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, Southern Poverty Law Center. (2019). “The Striking Outlier – The Persistent, Painful, and Problematic Practice of Corporal Punishment in Schools.” Web.