

# The Sexual Dangers of Spanking Children

*It is a disgusting and slavish treatment which would certainly be regarded as an insult if it were inflicted on adults... And consider how shameful, how dangerous to modesty are the effects produced by the pain or fear of the victims. This feeling of shame cripples and unmans the spirit, making it flee from and detest the light of day...*

Quintilian, A.D. 35-95

*But what you would not so readily believe upon my affirmation, was that there are persons who are stimulated to venery by strokes of rods, and worked up into a flame of lust by blows... A strange instance what a power the force of education has in grafting inveterate ill habits on our morals...*

Johann Heinrich Meibom, physician, 1629

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## By Tom Johnson

Spanking, defined as slapping of the buttocks, is a form of hitting and thus of physical violence. That fact alone should make the spanking of children unacceptable by the same standards that protect adults, who are not as vulnerable. However, there is more to spanking than simply hitting: spanking also trespasses on one of the body's most private and sexual areas—the buttocks. To fully address the wrongness of spanking children, therefore, we must consider not only the issue of physical violence, but also the issue of sexual trespass. While the harm of spanking's physical violence has been thoroughly explained and demonstrated over the past century in a vast body of academic literature, scientific research, legal treatises, and relatively recently in the popular media, it is quite rare that the

sexual consequences of spanking are openly and seriously discussed. This pamphlet aims to raise public awareness about the sexual aspects which make spanking an especially inappropriate and even dangerous way of disciplining children, whether it is done by parents, educators or other caretakers. While this pamphlet focuses on “spanking,” the most seemingly benign form of physical punishment, the arguments raised herein apply equally to paddling, switching, caning, strapping, or any other mode of forcible buttock-beating.

### **Buttocks are a sexual zone**

Like women's breasts, the buttocks are a sexual or erogenous part of the human anatomy, even though they are not actually sex organs. This is why baring one's buttocks in public is considered indecent as well as unlawful and why their exposure in movies or on television

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constitutes nudity. It is also why someone who uninvitedly fondles another person's buttocks is treated by law as a sexual offender. The sexual nature of the buttocks is explained not only by their proximity to the genitals, but also by their high concentration of nerve endings which lead directly to sexual nerve centers. Hence, the buttocks are a major locus of sexual signals.

### **Children are sexual beings**

The sexuality of the buttocks is significant not just to adults, but to children as well. Even though they are sexually immature and without an active sex drive, children are from birth neurologically complete sexual beings who are capable of experiencing erotic sensation. The existence of pedophiles, furthermore, means that children can also become the targets of sexual intentions. As much as we might like to imagine childhood as an innocent, carefree world beyond the influence of sexuality, we do children a disservice if we fail to recognize that they too have erogenous zones which deserve consideration and respect.

### **Spanking as sexual violation**

Since children are sexual beings and since the buttocks are a sexual region of the body, we should question the propriety of slapping children's buttocks. We generally understand that fondling or caressing a child's buttocks is a sexual offense (even if the child does not understand it to be so). We also know that slapping an adult's buttocks is a sexual offense (even if the offender does not get sexual pleasure from doing so).

The question, then, is why slapping a

child's buttocks is not considered a sexual offense. Is it because spanking, unlike fondling, is physically painful and used to punish misbehavior? No, or painfully spanking a misbehaving adult would not be a sexual offense. Is it because children are less likely to be sexual targets than adults, less likely to feel violated, and therefore protected less strictly? No, or fondling an adult would be a far more serious crime than fondling a child. A more plausible explanation for this breach of logic is simply that the majority of people are unable or unwilling to believe there could be anything indecent about a practice as old, common and accepted as the spanking of children—something which nearly everyone has received, given or witnessed at least once. And since spankings typically come from esteemed or even beloved authority figures, many people are loath to question this behavior.

In any case, freedom from sexual violation is one of the basic tenets of liberty most revered by Americans and by most of the free world. As this principle of inviolacy applies to adults, it should apply equally, if not especially, to children, who are below the age of consent. Spanking children may be a time-honored tradition, but any tradition that so gratuitously disregards their inviolacy deserves to be discontinued.

Some argue that spanking is justified or even commanded by the Bible, specifically the Book of Proverbs. There is a distinction, however, which should be of key interest to fundamentalists, between the practice in King Solomon's day of beating people on the back and the

modern American habit of buttocks-hitting: the latter is not prescribed anywhere in the Bible. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that the Old Testament contains passages which could be (and in some cases have been) construed as divine endorsements of wife-beating, racial warfare, slavery, the stoning to death of rebellious children and other behaviors that are outrageous by today's standards. As Shakespeare once wrote, "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose."

### **Spanking as sexual abuse**

As in ages past, there are people today who are sexually excited by spanking. This trait, which is often expressed in pornography and associated with sadomasochism, is known in scientific literature as *flagellantism*. While many flagellants seek to engage in consensual spanking between adults, some find the spanking of minors to be either more arousing or more opportune.

Since children in this country up to eighteen years old can still be legally and forcibly spanked by parents, guardians, teachers, school principals and other child care professionals, it is often easy for flagellants to obtain positions where they can sexually abuse children with little or no fear of repercussions. As long as society sees spanking as a legitimate act of discipline, and as long as the spanked youths are presumed to have "deserved" it, sexually abusive spankers have an effective moralistic disguise for their true motives. History, court records and current events contain numerous cases of flagellant sexual abuse against defenseless victims, and there is no

telling how many instances have gone unreported.

Some adults might rationalize: "Well, I know my intentions are purely nonsexual, so there's nothing wrong with my spanking a child." The main problem with this rationale is that it fails to consider all the children who are at the mercy of other adults, among whom there will always be some with motives that are not so pure – and not necessarily obvious. Even spankings that have no sexual motive contribute to the cover that sexually abusive spankers depend on, affirming the old alibi: "Hey, lots of people spank their kids. So what's the big deal?"

### **Spanking and psychosexual development**

Even without sexual motives on the part of the punisher, spanking can interfere with a child's normal sexual and psychological development. Because the buttocks are so close to the genitals and so multiply linked to sexual nerve centers, slapping them can trigger powerful and involuntary sensations of sexual pleasure. This can happen even in very young children, and even in spite of great, clearly upsetting pain.

This kind of sexual stimulation, which undermines any disciplinary purpose and which most people would agree is unsuitable for children in any context, can cause a child to impressionably attach his or her sexuality to the idea of spanking. This fixation may endure to cause problems in adult life. Or, on the other hand, the child might react against these unseemly feelings of pleasure by repressing his or her sexuality, so much

perhaps that as an adult, he or she has difficulty experiencing sexual pleasure and intimacy.

An additional danger is that the confusing mixture of pleasure with pain will become the basis for permanent sadomasochistic tendencies.

Sadomasochism, in which a person takes pleasure in inflicting or receiving pain, drives behavior that is destructive to oneself and to others, and therefore to society at large. While the intensity and background of individuals' sadomasochism varies widely, the great majority of studied cases point to the same primary cause: childhood whippings, usually on the buttocks.

The odds that spanking a child will lead to psychosexual aberrations would be difficult to calculate. However, the fact that there is any chance of these problems occurring should be reason enough to abandon the practice. (It is important to note that even children who are never spanked themselves can be negatively impacted by seeing other children punished this way.) The risks are completely unnecessary.

### **Spanking and modesty**

Imagine your reaction if an authority figure, having discovered some misdeed of yours, pinned you across his lap and began slapping your buttocks.

Painfulness aside, most people would consider this a rude, inexcusable assault on their modesty, no matter what they had done to "deserve" it.

Many people might assume that children, especially very young children, are too

ignorant or naive to feel such indignity, or perhaps too impressed by the physical pain of spanking to care about much else. The truth is, however, that spanking can seriously injure a child's sense of modesty. When a child is old enough to be told by adults to act modestly (which is not merely a social requirement, but also a wise precaution against potential child molesters), that child is likely to internalize and develop modesty as a personal value that will increase with age. This value persists even though the child might lapse into immodest behavior from time to time, as most children do. Consequently, the child whose buttocks are slapped may experience deep and lasting sexual shame, especially if the punishment is done in front of others or involves a state of undress. Actually, there are some adults who consciously emphasize this humiliation as part of the punishment (and some, for that matter, who do not limit spanking to younger children or even to preteens). But just as inflicting sexual shame is an unthinkable punishment for adults in any civilized society, it is surely an outrageous way to treat children.

It is a strange inconsistency, furthermore, for adults to exhort children to modesty while punishing them in a way that aggressively denies their modesty and privacy. Such mixed messages tend to confuse children or make them skeptical toward adult authority. Especially if adults hope to instill children with strong values of modesty, self-respect, and respect for others — values that become very important through the trials of puberty and adolescence — adults should teach by example and refrain from the

disrespectful practice of bottom-slapping.

### Conclusion

It is not disputed that spanking has a sexual side as well as a punitive side. Indeed, our popular culture and media suggest there is wide awareness of this fact, however unspoken. Society has nonetheless failed to squarely address the serious implications of spanking's punitive/sexual duality. Considering the power of sex to corrupt, along with the coercive nature of punishment, we should be alarmed at the very idea of discipline through spanking – all the more so when it is directed at a group of people as powerless, fragile and unsuspecting as children.

### EXPERTS' QUOTES

“Spanking on the buttocks can produce definitely erotic sensations, including sexual orgasm, in some children. Some of these children have been known to cause themselves to be spanked, by misconducting themselves on purpose and by pretending distress while receiving the desired ‘punishment’... The frequency with which this happens is not known, although it may not be altogether rare... The spankings in these cases may have been given for the adult’s own perverted gratification (‘sadism’); or at least there might have been culpable awareness and toleration of the child’s sexual reaction on the part of the adult. ...Only some decades ago perverts masquerading as governesses or tutors were reportedly anything but rare in some European countries.” **J. F. Oliven, M D**. *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology* (1965)

“In many cases, the avowed disciplinary value of flagellation in schools and colleges was a mere pretense to enable sadists to secure sexual titillation.”

**George Ryley Scott**, historian, sociologist, anthropologist. *The History of Corporal Punishment* (1938)

“When a child is hit on the buttocks... [t]his kind of violent touch can be sexualized in the child’s mind not only because of a real flow of blood into the genitalia, but also because of a longing for intimacy with the parent: if painful physical touch is the only fulfillment of that longing, then this can “feel good.”

**Shere Hite**, sex researcher, sociopsychologist. *The Hite Report on the Family* (1995)

“These are the realities that most of us remain eager to deny... So long as children are beaten by adults, the obsessions with domination and submission, with power and authority, with shame and humiliation, with painful pleasure – all hallmarks of sadomasochism – will remain an enduring consequence of the ordinary violence and coercion done in the name of discipline... Sadomasochism is not an aberration; it is inherent in corporal punishment...” **Philip Greven**, professor of history. *Spare the Child* (1990)

“I have had constantly to do with neurotics in whom sadistic feelings were first aroused by corporal punishment; after the sadistic impulse thus awakened has been repressed and forms the starting points of very malignant aberrations about which it would be very disingenuous to aver that they would

have developed without the free use of the rod... The number of those who are harmed through beating, especially upon the buttocks, is undoubtedly very great... Even one who passionately contemns sexuality will hardly be inclined to deny that the corporal punishment induced well-marked sexual stimulation—although the gluteal region is not within the domain of the genital organs.” **Oskar Pfister**, physician, psychoanalyst. *Love in Children and its Aberrations* (1924)

“Frequent spankings, too, may have a negative impact on sex development. Because of the proximity of the sex organs, a child may get sexually aroused when spanked. Or he may so enjoy the making up that follows the punishment that he will seek suffering as a necessary prelude to love. There are many adult couples who seem to need a good fight before a good night.” **Dr. Haim G. Ginott**, child psychologist. *Between Parent and Child* (1966)

“Advocates of corporal punishment in schools should examine very carefully the weight of evidence now available and, particularly in light of the pornographic component, consider whether they can justify the continuation of a system with such a capacity for exciting unhealthy interest.” **British Psychological Society**, “Report on Corporal Punishment in Schools” (1980)

“Being beaten excites children sexually because it is an intense excitation of the erogenous zones of the skin of the buttocks and of the muscles below the skin...” **Otto Fenichel**, M.D. *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (1945)

“Ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, it has been well known to all educationalists that the painful stimulation of the skin of the buttocks is one of the erotic roots of the passive instrument of cruelty (masochism).” **Sigmund Freud**. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, VII (1905)

“The adult flagellant fantasy, in short, always derives from the infantile one. As with all sexual perversions, we are dealing with a variety of arrested development...that puberty and subsequent experience have been unable to dislodge... We need to examine its roots in childhood...” **Ian Gibson**, *The English Vice* (1979)

## NEWS REPORTS

### ***The New York Times* (12/22/92)**

The director of a Manhattan junior high school for children at risk of dropping out was arrested yesterday and charged with sexually abusing a 14-year-old boy who was a ninth-grader at the school, officials said... [Investigator Robert] Viteretti said that on two occasions [the director] asked the boy into his office, then closed and locked his door and pulled down the boy’s pants and underwear. ‘He would start spanking the boy for his own sexual gratification, and stroking and caressing his genitalia,’ he said...

### ***The Sacramento Bee* (3/26/95)**

PHOENIX — The headmaster of a private school has been arrested and accused of forcing a 15-year-old girl to remove her clothing and kneel in prayer

while he struck her with a wooden paddle. The girl's mother witnessed the paddling, too frightened to do anything to stop it, Phoenix police said... The teen's 6-year-old sister, waiting in the next room, also heard her sister's cries for help, police said...

Her mother had brought her there to consider enrolling her in September.

Police say Michael William Wetton told the girl during her 75-minute ordeal on Feb. 24 that he wanted her to understand corporal punishment, which is used to discipline students at the school... After Wetton's arrest, some parents directed anger at the police... "The Bible says to use the rod," [school board member Rosemary] Rice said, adding that the arrest "is an assault on Christian beliefs."...

As part of the orientation, Wetton reportedly took the girl to a room alone and told her to take off her clothes. Crying, she removed everything but her bra and panties. Wetton then struck her once with a wooden paddle. Wetton then reportedly forced the girl to disrobe completely, made her kneel as if in prayer and struck her across the buttocks. Then, police say, he forced her to grab the edge of a table, spread her legs and submit to another swat. Finally, he made her bow down to him and recite the Lord's Prayer.

***The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)***  
**(8/19/97)**

ELYRIA—Raymond Boyle could get two years in prison after pleading guilty yesterday to child endangering for spanking his teenage daughters with

their pants down.

Gary A. Crow, executive director of Lorain County Children Services, said the case shows how blurry the line can be between discipline and abuse.

Ohio law permits use of reasonable corporal punishment, but prosecutors said Boyle's methods were a mental risk to his daughters, 15 and 13...

Amherst police Detective Alex Molnar said Boyle, 39, required his daughters to strip naked from the waist down before spanking them last year.

Officials said one girl was spanked three times, with the first in January 1995 and the last in April 1996; and the other was spanked in April 1996.

Molnar said they confided the humiliation to a school counselor after the April incident. Molnar said the girls were punished by their father repeatedly for minor things, including misbehaving on the school bus or disobeying his rules...

***The News-Times (Danbury, CT)***  
**(12/3/96)**

LITCHFIELD, Conn. (AP) - A little league coach accused of repeatedly spanking a little girl after pulling down her pants has been charged with sexual assault.

Ronald Ellis, 30, of New Hartford, was in Bantam Superior Court on Monday. He was released on a written promise to appear in court.

Ellis has been charged with fourth-degree

sexual assault and risk of injury to a minor in the October incidents...

***The Gazette (Montreal) (10/31/00)***

Amanda Green was being a naughty 7-year-old and knew it on that day 13 years ago when she played with the water and climbed on the toilets in the girls' bathroom at Greendale elementary school in Pierrefonds.

She and her girlfriend were caught by their teacher, and Amanda knew she was in for it when she was sent to the principal's office.

David Wadsworth, principal of the school, immediately said he would see the girls individually. When it was Amanda's turn, the Grade 2 student nervously entered Wadsworth's office.

What she had done was wrong, Wadsworth told her, and now he was going to let her pick one of two choices for a punishment: either he would tell her parents and teachers what she had done and take away certain privileges, such as recess and gym; or she could take off her pants and panties and let him spank her as he would his own child, and no one need ever know what had happened.

"Can't I leave my underwear on?" asked Amanda. No, she vividly remembers Wadsworth telling her, embarrassment is part of the punishment.

Amanda, a feisty child, knew she shouldn't have to remove her clothes. She didn't like either punishment, she told him, defiantly. Perhaps taken aback by someone willing to stand up to him,

Wadsworth told her to leave his office and never again brought up the incident.

Amanda's friend chose the spanking.

Wadsworth has pleaded guilty to possession of child pornography - pictures and videos of children being spanked - as well as to sexual assault and gross indecency against eight former students at a Pincourt elementary school. Amanda Green, now a Concordia University student, finds herself haunted by how many other children might have chosen to be spanked on a bare bottom by a man everyone believed was a sweetheart principal and a terrific teacher...

***A letter read on BBC Radio 4's "Any Answers?" (4/84)***

"My partner is a retired headmaster of a prep school where he had the power to beat any small boy. He now spends a great deal of time and energy in contacting young men and women who are willing to be beaten, as this is the only way he can get sexually aroused."

***The Philadelphia Inquirer (4/10/95)***

...He is 61, small, heavy, not particularly noticeable. Barbara, his second wife of 15 years, knows about his addiction and continuing recovery.

"If he's late getting home, I get nervous," she says. "I'm not concerned about him picking up a woman. I'm scared he'll get caught being an exhibitionist."

His father liked spanking him. It was humiliating and ritualistic, with his father always saying the slap of his hand on his son's bottom "sounded like a drum



or timpani.” His mother, 15 years younger than her husband, kept quiet. The result: “I’ve exhibited myself constantly with the attendant fantasy of a punishment scenario.” Spanking is what he sought. In fact, his first arrest was for soliciting two girls to spank him...

### SUGGESTED READING

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