

The New Criterion

Dispatch August 04, 2011 04:04 pm

Spare Me

by James Bowman

In yesterday's *Guardian* a pair of researchers named Victoria Talwar and Stephanie M Carlson report on their own recently published study in *Social Development* which purports finally to have discredited the maxim: "Spare the rod and spoil the child." This saying is said to have "a strong resonance even in countries where corporal punishment has been abolished, such as the UK and Canada" — as well as the US where, remarkably, "it is still allowed in many states." The Mses Talwar and Carlson do not mention that the words they deprecate are from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* and involve a bawdy pun which the prurient may discover for themselves. The child in question is Cupid. But Butler was probably playing off some once-common saying that does refer to the discipline of children — sparing the rod is mentioned in this context in Proverbs 13:24 — and so would be as shocked as we are meant to be that "our research into the impact of corporal punishment on learning clearly indicates punitive discipline is no way to teach children."

Here's how this scientific breakthrough was accomplished.

We compared children in two elementary schools in West Africa due to a naturally occurring policy shift in which private schools had the option of maintaining their traditional physical discipline tactics (now officially outlawed in public schools in that country) or using more modern, non-physical forms of punishment. In the punitive school, discipline in the form of beating with a stick, slapping of the head and pinching was administered publicly and routinely for offenses ranging from forgetting a pencil to being disruptive in class. In the other school, children were disciplined for similar offenses with the use of time-outs and verbal reprimands. The parents of children in both schools had similar occupations and endorsed the use of mild physical punishment at home. This situation presented a unique opportunity to test the adage.

Well, you won't be surprised to learn that the results of this experiment were very much in line with what the progressive consensus on physical chastisement of children has been telling us all along. The bottom line is this: "Our research suggests that a harsh punitive environment may have long-term detrimental effects on children's executive functioning. It appears the more corporal punishment there is over time, the greater the negative effects on children."

I doubt that it is possible to draw such a conclusion from such evidence. Apparently, they have treated their project as if they were producing a mathematical equation — solve for x when x equals "corporal punishment." But corporal punishment is not one thing and is not, even if it were one thing, a measurable quantity, though it may be measured in crude ways that are quite irrelevant to its effectiveness or lack of it as a way of persuading people of an ideological bent that science has shown they were right all along. But let us accept, for the sake of argument, that "the more corporal punishment there is over time, the greater the negative effects on children." Intuitively, that sounds plausible. Yet it doesn't tell us anything about the effectiveness of corporal punishment as it is (or ought to be) most often actually administered, since it has always depended for its effectiveness on its rarity.

The "rod" which Proverbs tells us only he who hates his son "spareth" is thus a little like the nuclear deterrent: only useful when not used. Or used once or twice as a demonstration that it might be used, but never used routinely. The more corporal punishment there is the less effective it will be, because the disciplinary agent is not the physical pain it entails but the fear of that pain, and of the public humiliation of its application. By making the pain familiar, customary and, thus, less humiliating, you will also diminish the fear of it and hence its disciplinary effectiveness. I think the real progressive argument with the floggers is over this fear. The utopian view is that fear in itself is an evil to be banished from the earth — and especially from having anything to do with the education of children. But Proverbs has an answer to that one too. It is that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

James Bowman is a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of *Honor, A History* (Encounter).