

Against corporal punishment, but not very

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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About a dozen years ago, I was back home visiting from my young-adult life in the city, sitting around drinking coffee with my mom and my sisters, when I suddenly heard my much-younger brother crying out in pain. I jumped up. “Where are you, buddy?” I called out.

The others reacted differently: they laughed at me. “Dad’s giving him a spanking,” my mom explained gently. “Not a sound you’ve heard in a while?”

I hadn’t. I knew some of my friends spanked their kids, but they hadn’t done it around me. Others didn’t do it at all. And by then I had read up on [some of the research](#) into the negative effects of corporal punishment. Yes, lots of kids who are spanked end up okay, but that doesn’t prove much. I think [Clay Jones is right here](#):

Spanking is a practice that appears to be carried from generation to generation primarily by anecdotal reports of success, cultural momentum and weak science. Odd, at least to me, is the fact that many parents who spank seem to proudly wear their own history of being spanked as some kind of a badge of honor. “Look at me. I was spanked and I turned out just fine!”

Yup. There's certainly more "it worked on me, it'll work on my kids" than "I've reviewed the evidence and made a decision" at play here. But Jones loses me when he goes on:

I doubt many parents look at a newborn child and plan to make use of corporal punishment to mold them into an upstanding citizen. More likely they do so out of anger and frustration, and only then find the need to justify the act.

He loses me because I’m pretty sure my dad—and many other evangelical parents—did and do in fact *plan* to use corporal punishment (though it isn't necessarily an idea conceived while gazing at a newborn, or one aimed at building *citizenship* exactly). And I’m certain my dad did not spank us out of anger or

frustration.

I don't precisely have an "anecdotal report of success"; I have no idea whether we would have otherwise turned out better or worse or the same. What I can report is that the spanking was done in love, with great intentionality and care.

When our misbehavior reached a certain threshold, Mom or Dad would tell us to go wait for Dad in the bathroom. He kept a wooden spoon on the windowsill there, the relatively flimsy kitchen kind. He would follow a few minutes behind us. We would talk about the situation; he would paddle our butts with the spoon; we would pray together. Then he would stay there with us till the tears were done. Usually we would emerge from the room laughing together.

He never hit us anywhere else on our bodies. He never used anything bigger, harder, or sharper than a wooden spoon. He rarely lost his cool, and when he did he was wise enough to take a deep breath and wait till later.

To be clear, I don't take this experience as irrefutable evidence that spanking is harmless unless and until it crosses a particular line. Again, I have no way of knowing whether I—to say nothing of other people—"turned out okay" because of or in spite of being spanked. What's more, I get that some parents, unlike my dad, might find that such an intentional approach escalates carelessly and unpredictably into something more damaging. [Adrian Peterson](#) might not be a monster plotting harm against his own kids, but that doesn't leave his 4-year-old any less harmed.

At the same time, my experience makes it hard for me to take seriously the notion that a word like "abuse" or "violence" belongs within a mile of the sort of spanking I grew up with. Yes, the research on the slim pros and considerable cons is pretty clear, and I trust this research. But we parents make tons of choices based less on research than on instinct, tradition, and belief; we're notorious for it. And if I were to make a list of things that rise above parenting *adiaphora* to the level of true essentials—I'll never make such a list, certainly not in my first year as a dad, but if I were—there's a lot I'd include long before "don't spank."

Just a few years removed from my childhood home, I was startled to come back and hear a child I love crying in pain. That's not a sound I want to hear, and it's not a pain I intend to inflict. But I think I'll always be slow to criticize other parents for taking my parents' particular careful, loving approach.