

Position Paper on Corporal Punishment in the Schools

“No school can be considered safe or supportive if its students are fearful of being physically punished.”
– John B. King, U.S. Education Secretary 2016

Definition and Prevalence Rate of Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment is defined by Florida Statutes as the moderate use of physical force or physical contact by a teacher or principal to maintain discipline or to enforce school rules (s. 1006.07(1), Florida Statutes). Every industrialized country in the world except for the U.S., Canada, and one state in Australia now prohibit corporal punishment in the schools. In the U.S., the most typical form of school corporal punishment is the striking of the student’s buttocks with a wooden paddle by a school authority (NASP, 2014). Although 31 states have now prohibited the use of corporal punishment, Florida statutes still allow for each individual district to determine if they will permit principals and/or teachers to use corporal punishment as a means of controlling students’ conduct (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2020). In the 2018-2019 academic year, 20 of the 67 Florida school districts (30%) reported students receiving corporal punishment (a total of 1,333 students). Counties with the most incidents of corporal punishment for that school year were: Columbia (247), Suwannee (174), Washington (158), Jackson (154), and Levy (131). Although these numbers have decreased significantly in the past decade, one incidence of corporal punishment in the schools is too many. Nonetheless, research has continually shown that corporal punishment is detrimental to students’ well-being and disproportionately affects elementary-aged children, poor children, Black and Bi-or Multi-racial children, and children with disabilities.

Consequences of Corporal Punishment

Every child has the right to learn in an environment free from violence. Schools are the only institutions in America in which striking another person is legally sanctioned. It is not allowed in prisons, in the military, or in mental hospitals. It is even prohibited as a sentence for crime. In a society that is already marred by appalling rates of physical violence, schools should not be condoning a practice that contributes to the cycle of child abuse, trauma, bullying and the pro-violence attitudes of American youth. Corporal punishment has been found to be associated with higher levels of violence and aggression, decreased self-control, lower academic achievement, school absence and eventual dropout, and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Bruises and broken bones are not unusual consequences of corporal punishment; tragically, children have even died as a result of corporal punishment.

Alternatives to Corporal Punishment

The Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP) is one of over 60 organizations that oppose the use of corporal punishment in schools, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Bar Association, and the National Association of State Boards of Education (US Alliance to End the Hitting of Children, 2020). FASP recognizes that discipline is necessary for effective schooling, but encourages schools and teachers to utilize any combination of the numerous empirically-supported alternatives to corporal punishment, including:

- Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives
- Restorative practices (often interchangeable referred to as restorative justice)
- Social skills training and behavioral contracting
- Disciplinary consequences with instructional or reflective components
- Multi-tiered systems of support and programs that emphasize early intervention and diagnosis
- Student praise and recognition programs
- Peer mediation
- Parent training and informational sessions on effective discipline

School Psychologists can provide many direct and indirect services to improve the discipline of individual children as well as services to improve classroom and schoolwide discipline. They can also help to establish frameworks for trauma-informed schools. FASP supports legislation that abolishes corporal punishment in the schools, and encourages legislators, parents, teachers, and school administrators to adopt and to enforce more effective and constructive alternatives to school discipline that promote personal safety, fair and equitable practices, and positive well-being for our children and youth.

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