

Prosperity Through Timeless Values

Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse • Your Coach for the Culture Wars



“If you are dealing with a sweet, even-tempered child who wants to please, you can reason with them and they will comply. But there are some little stinkers who need something a little firmer.”

SOME PEOPLE JUST NEED TO GET SPANKED.

A childless legislator here in California (where else?) has proposed a legislative ban on spanking. Sally Lieber, Democrat (naturally) from Mountain View, which is in Northern California (why am I not surprised?) believes this is a proper function of state government.

According to the San Jose Mercury News, “The bill, which is still being drafted, will be written broadly, she added, prohibiting ‘any striking of a child, any corporal punishment, smacking, hitting, punching, any of that.’ Lieber said it would be a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail or a fine up to \$1,000, although a legal expert advising her on the proposal said first-time offenders would probably only have to attend parenting classes.”

The people of California are understandably outraged at this outrageous assault on parental authority. But there is an even better reason to be outraged: banning spanking is not good for kids. Child rearing experts generally do not agree with a ban on spanking. The “two-swat spank” has been extensively studied. Two swats on a covered bottom do not constitute child abuse, and in fact, can be an important adjunct to reasoning in disciplining a child. The Murky News (as the locals call it: actually, it isn’t a bad paper, as MSM outlets go) interviewed one of the leading scholars of corporal punishment, Dr. Robert Larzelere.

“Professor Robert Larzelere, who has studied child dis-

cipline for 30 years, said his research shows spanking is fine, as long as it’s used sparingly and doesn’t escalate to abuse. “If it’s used in a limited way,” the Oklahoma State University professor said, “it can be more effective than almost any other type of punishment.” He added that children 18 months old or younger shouldn’t be spanked at all, because they can’t understand why it’s happening. As for Lieber’s proposal, the professor said: “I think this proposal is not just a step too far, it’s a leap too far. At least from a scientific perspective there really isn’t any research to support the idea that this would make things better for children.”

This is a man of good sense. I happen to have an article by Dr. Larzelere and some co-authors in my filing cabinet. It compares a variety of disciplinary strategies: reasoning, and two types of punishment, non-corporal punishment, such as time-out, and non-abusive corporal punishment. He concludes that parents should try reasoning with a child first. If “that tactic does not receive appropriate compliance, then parents should back up the initial tactic with a slightly more aversive tactic (e.g. non-corporal punishment such as time-out). Only for continued defiant non-compliance should a parent resort to nonabusive corporal punishment as back up [Other authors] have shown that a back-up such as a two-swat spank is necessary to make time-out effective with the most non-compliant preschoolers.”

In other words, if you are dealing with a sweet, even-tempered child who wants to please, you can reason with them and they will comply. But there are some little stinkers who need something a little firmer.

When Dr. Larzelere wrote the above article, his affiliation was listed as “Boys Town.” Presumably, he observed some troubled kids during his time there.

In my experience as a foster parent, I too, observed some troubled kids. There are indeed kids who will not comply with adult instructions, no matter how nicely you talk to them. (Parents who talk too much have been studied too. The experts call them “natterers.”) The presumption that spanking is always and everywhere a form of child abuse assumes that the harm the child endures in the spanking is more serious than the harm he endures by being allowed to continue in his defiance. Failing to set limits on a child’s behavior is itself a form of child abuse. Going through childhood undisciplined is not in any child’s interest.

The essence of Sally Lieber’s proposal is that otherwise competent parents will be presumed abusive if they swat their children. The parents can be put in prison for a year. The kids will be put into the already overcrowded and ineffective foster care system. The parents of difficult children will be the most likely to run afoul of these rules. Being in foster care is certainly a more traumatic experience than being swatted on the bottom.

All because some adults pretend they can’t tell the difference between a swat and child abuse.

Perhaps the voters will give Assemblywoman Lieber a time-out until she calms down.

Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D., is the author of Smart Sex: Finding Life-long Love In A Hook-up World.