



Let Them Eat Wood



By Dennis Marks, MD

As an infant, Dennis Marks recalls his mother warning, in Greek, "You're going to eat wood," if he was on the verge of a spanking. On occasion, he now argues, spanking is not a bad idea.

IT WAS 1956 IN SAN FRANCISCO, a few weeks before I completed military service and came to Sacramento to start 30 years of pediatric practice. I had just parked in front of the Marina Motel at the end of Lombard Street.

"Daddy, Daddy!" The words from our 3 1/2-year-old, Debby, heard above the roar of the traffic, startled me. The semis were whizzing by inches away, speeding to the Golden Gate Bridge. As I was easing through the driver's side door, Debby had quietly gotten out on the other side of the car. I turned to see her running toward me around the front of the car.

"NOooo!" I screamed. She stopped instantly as a truck sped by, wind whipping her hair and clothes.

How many times do we need immediate obedience from our children? How often does permissive or inconsistent child rearing convert a STOP sign to a "should I or shouldn't I" challenge? I feel that Debby's life was saved because she responded to a command without explanation. Enforcing rules, even with an occasional spanking, I think improves the chance of "reflex" obedience when it is needed.

Child rearing practices had been central to my professional life, and an action of the American Academy of Pediatrics has caused me to write this article. The Academy, an organization that I have tremendous respect for and have been a member of for many years, issued a statement condemning spankings and urged only "time out."

Perhaps an explanation lies in an experience I had some years ago. Harry Bakwin, MD, was one half of the then-popular physician-writing team of Bakwin and Bakwin. Harry, a pediatrician and former teacher of mine, had written in a national magazine that he felt that tonsillectomies were not necessary.

I confronted him at a meeting. "Harry, how can you say there should be no T&As? I recently had a patient who had frequent strep sore throat. After 10 or 20 days on antibiotics, and a few days or weeks off antibiotics, the infection would recur. There were no carriers in the family. I put the patient on a month of antibiotics followed by immediate tonsillectomy. I asked the ENT man to slice and culture the tonsils and sure enough, the strep were still present."

Doctor Bakwin responded, "I wrote that there was no need so that every T&A done would have as much indication as your case."

My defense of spanking is fraught with ambivalence. I was raised with occasional early spankings that I don't remember. I know they happened; otherwise, why would I have

such a vivid recollection of my Greek mother's warning, "Tha fas xilo - You're going to eat wood!" After one spanking, in our family this effectively became, "Do you want to go to the car?"

Professionally I have had far too much evidence of the abuse of so-called discipline or "spankings." I wrote an article published in 1962 titled Filicide about personal encounters with deaths and injuries and the need for vigilance in our neighborhoods.

In one case, a call came in early one morning. "Doctor, I think my baby is dead." I drove to the apartment expecting another tragic sudden infant death syndrome. When I arrived I wondered why the bed was stripped and mother dressed. The husband was gone. The coroner called later that day, "The baby had severe injuries which caused the death. We are searching for the husband."

He was found in a nearby state, returned for trial, convicted and jailed. It seems the baby's continuous crying caused him to throw her across the room. He had married the mother knowing that she was pregnant with another man's baby."

He was released after nine months in jail after participating in a food strike.

A second murder was caused by a father who punched his one-year-old son in the belly for dirtying a diaper that had just been changed. His blow ruptured the boy's aorta. The father was convicted and sent to jail for a year.

There is reason to believe that these men had been beaten as children and set the pattern of child abuse. I was involved with the legislature in formulating California's Child Protective Services statutes. In recent years, these preposterously low sentences have been dramatically increased. The reporting requirements have been extended to all child care individuals and the clergy.

If I had to choose between frequent spankings, let alone child abuse, I, too, would try to ban spankings. Certainly it is prudent to remind parents that time out for infractions is the preferred approach. Conforming behavior is reinforced by abundant praise.

However, an occasional spanking of the right type at the right time has helped many loving families establish respect for safety and the rights of others. The right type of spanking is administered with the flat of the hand to the buttocks or thigh. It should follow closely a blatant disregard for safety - and rarely for other severe infractions - after other disciplinary methods are ignored. Although emotions may be provoked by the behavior inducing the spanking, it must be controlled anger, never rage.

I do not equate avoidance of spankings to permissiveness. However, my study of the failures of the permissive approach to education and child-rearing, bolstered by my professional experience, started me on the road to the opinions expressed in this article. I don't want to add to the anguish of those who, doing the best they knew and with the best of intentions, had bad outcomes. However, I have become convinced that love is number one, but not enough. Yes, there were suicidal or accidental deaths attributed to the very impulsive behavior of youngsters who did not know how to handle disappointments.

Toward the end of my practice, a mother in my office refused to go back to school for her daughter's forgotten homework assignments. She said this was the second time that week this had happened. When the daughter complained she might get a bad grade, her mother said perhaps she would be more responsible in the future. When I expressed surprise at her newfound strictness, she told me that their rabbi had held a meeting to tell parents of a recent study into the high rate of suicide among Jewish teenagers. He explained that suicide may be caused by the way parents help their children avoid any frustration in the early years. These children may not learn to cope before the inevitable stresses of the teen years.

In this era of managed care I pray that today's physicians are allowed the time to probe for

and help parents with these important behavioral questions. Regardless of the approach, there will be difficult times for our children, especially in the teen years. I don't think we should add to those stresses by condemning the 90 percent of Americans who use occasional spankings and belong to the "Tough Love Club."

dennis_marks@bbs.macnexus.org

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

Copyright © 2000-2008 Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society - All Right's Reserved