

Latest study tells parents: Spare rod, save child

Physical punishment sends mixed signals

By RICHARD A. RYAN
Detroit News

WASHINGTON — Call it what you will — a “spanking,” a “swat,” a “pop,” or a “whupping” — it is bad for children and can lead to anti-social and even violent behavior, a study published yesterday concludes.

Because anti-social behavior in children is associated with violence and other crime as adults, “society as a whole, not just children, could benefit from ending the system of violent child-rearing that goes under the euphemism of spanking,” said Dr. Murray Straus of the University of New Hampshire’s Family Research Center, author of the study.

The results of the study, involving 807 children between ages 6 and 9, are published in the August issue of the American Medical Association’s “Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.”

Forty-four percent of the mothers interviewed reported spanking their children in the week before the interview. “Spanking” included striking the child’s bottom or hands or grabbing the arms in an aggressive manner.

Two years after the initial interviews, Straus found that the children who were spanked showed an increase in anti-social behavior, including cheating and lying, being cruel to others, breaking things deliberately and having trouble with teachers.

Although spanking does not always cause anti-social behavior, there was a definite correlation between spanking and such behavior, Straus reported.

Of course, not every child who is spanked engages in anti-social behavior, he said. Equally, there are children who are never spanked and engage in anti-social conduct.

Some people will say they were spanked as children and they are OK today, Straus said. Similarly, people will say they smoked all their lives and they are OK.

“But just because a person who smokes is alive at 65 doesn’t mean smoking is all right,” Straus said. “And just because your parents spanked you, and you’re OK, doesn’t mean spanking is OK.”

Madelyn Swift, author of “Discipline for Life,” a book on child-rearing, said spanking can work “short-term.”

But Swift warned that spanking establishes a dangerous principle in the child’s mind “that I have a right to hurt someone if I don’t like what they are doing.”

Dr. Jimmie Leleszi, a child psychiatrist at Detroit Medical Center, said the old bromide of “spare the rod and spoil the child” is not true.

“Permissiveness is not letting children get away with murder,” he said. “Children need discipline. They want discipline.” But through patient education, he says, not physical force.

Leleszi said he is not aware of a single child psychiatrist or psychologist who says it is OK to spank a child.

“There might be some,” he said, “but I don’t know any.”