

How to Help Families Stop Spanking

Spanking is no more effective than other forms of punishment, yet it has many potential adverse effects on children, including increased anger, aggression, sibling rivalry, later delinquency, lower cognitive abilities, decreased self-esteem, and increased vulnerability to stress. Parents who spank often have difficulty changing to other methods of discipline on their own and may need help in thinking through alternative approaches.

- Be aware that even parents who believe in spanking do not like doing it.
- The best way to stop spanking is to never start, but parents can also stop spanking in about 3 weeks.
- Ask if the parents would be willing to discipline without spanking.
- Help parents set reasonable rules for their child. (See *Tool for Families: Principles of Limit Setting*, p. 81.)
- Make sure the parents are noticing and acknowledging their child's good behaviors. If they are not, teach them methods of positive reinforcement. (See *Tool for Families: Charting Positive Behavior*, p. 83.)
- Make sure the parents are spending enough individual time with their child. If they are not, teach them about special time. (See the following *Tools for Families: Guidelines for Special Time*, p. 82; *Communicating with Children*, p. 84.)
- Meet with the child's parents (both, if possible) to discuss discipline.
 - Ask each parent what they do when their child misbehaves and how it works. Get specific examples.
 - Ask each parent how they were disciplined when they were growing up and what they decided about the kind of discipline they would use as parents.
 - Ask who else disciplines the child and how.
 - Ask what happens if parents disagree on how to handle a discipline situation. Advise parents on the importance of not interfering in the discipline of the other: "Whoever starts, finishes." (If one parent has concerns about discipline being overly harsh, further evaluation is required.)
 - Teach the parents use of time out (see *Tool for Families: Time Out*, p. 88), and determine the most likely three behaviors for which they anticipate needing it. Help them choose serious enough problems, such as aggression.
 - Request that both parents agree to use time out and not spank for 3 weeks. If one disagrees, that parent should agree not to interfere, to limit any spanking to certain misbehaviors, and to only use the hand on the buttocks for one spank. That parent is likely to change when he or she sees the other parent's success.
 - Be available by telephone for questions. Schedule a follow-up appointment in 3 weeks. Request that parents call before then if problems occur.
 - Report any suspected abuse, but also offer continued discipline education to the family.

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