

Ought children to be spanked?

In the previous article we considered the necessity of corporal punishment in the Church's teaching, as a necessary means to teach self discipline and overcome self-centeredness. Yet we also saw the profound psychological reasons why St. John Bosco, amongst others, greatly discouraged the use of corporal punishment, as incompatible with his supernatural system of education, based upon the practice of religion, the explanations of reason and the expression of kindness.

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It now remains to be seen whether these two viewpoints can be reconciled, whether there is such a thing as corporal punishment that neither incites to rebellion nor humiliates, and that does not demean the educator. A first and fundamental distinction needs to be made, and it is between corporal punishment before the age of reason and that which is applied to the child once he has acquired this use of reason.

Before the age of reason

Some silly parents can be seen entering into long explanations to four year old little Johnny why he has done something wrong or how he has hurt Jesus, by hitting his sister, not sitting still in church, or some other act of disobedience. It is not that the explanation is bad. However, it cannot be expected to have any direct impact, changing the child's behavior. Not yet having the use of reason, his behavior is determined by his bodily wants and needs, and by his instincts and impulses. He is not a pure animal, for he has human nature, but the human and reasonable side of his nature has not yet been actuated. It cannot determine behavior. His behavior will be modified in the same way as an animal's behavior is modified, namely by a show of force, proving that the adult parent is in charge, is not intimidated by him, nor afraid of his tantrums, anger, tears or other passions, and that he will insist on submission. He must be forced to submit, as an animal is trained, a dog for example, or a horse is broken. In this way his emotional and instinctive nature is trained, so

that when his reason and will develop they will have a readily submissive lower nature that they can in turn control.

This show of force, which insists on control, can be done in various ways. However, raising one's voice to repeat the same thing several times over is not one of those ways. This is rather to show impotence, the inability to control the child. This show of force must be immediate for it to be related by the child to the act of disobedience or disordered screaming or the like. An immediate smack, that stings, that shows the parent's disapproval, that demonstrates that the parent is indeed in control, and that he will not tolerate this behavior, is by far the most effective means. The child from his early months of life can learn in this way what behaviors are unacceptable, and if there is consistency in these simple light punishments from a very early age, the child will learn discipline before he has any idea what it really is. It is true that other signs of displeasure, such as a look of disapproval or rebuke, can suffice to correct the behavior - but only if the parent shows that he really is in control by sometimes applying corporal punishment and showing that there are consequences. It is certainly true that the firmness of the application of spanking to little children before the age of reason must be combined with love and affection, so that they never lose the trust in and abandonment to the educator so necessary for him to maintain control. Consequently, there can be no effective punishment without posi-

tive reinforcement of good behavior, without a show of affection that the child can appreciate. Likewise, anger, frustration, annoyance on the part of the parent will destroy the good effect of punishment, for they show that the parent is not really in control at all, and will undermine the child's confidence and trust. Nevertheless, affection does not have to be shown at the same time as the punishment. The withdrawal of the desired affection, combined with a show of force, is an extremely effective punishment both for animals and for children. The affection is only to be given once the punishment is given and the crying over with. Otherwise mixed, contradictory signals, will also nullify the effect of the punishment. Furthermore, the parent in whom tenderness and firmness are combined together, will be very sparing in his application of corporal punishment. The purpose is to show disapproval, and that he is in charge and will not tolerate a certain behavior. The child who is already well disciplined, will respond to a look, remark, or a word. Consequently, the earlier and the more consistently the child is spanked, the clearer the union between tenderness and firmness, the less frequent will the spankings be as the child grows older. This being said, it must always be remembered that no two children are alike, and that some children have a particularly rebellious nature, that requires a much more active show of force, whereas others with a more gentle disposition, respond much more quickly. Once harnessed in self-discipline, though, the difficult choleric have the disposition to achieve much more.

After the use of reason

What about the child who has attained the use of reason? Surely the simple show of force is no longer going to work on him? Can his behavior, now becoming more and more reasonable in its motivation, be changed by the impression of punishment on the lower, sensitive nature? Is it not likely to make him rebel, now that he is in control of his own free will? It all depends. It is certainly true that the disciplinary approach must change radically once the child attains the use of reason. A punishment that is not understood as just and reasonable will certainly be counterproductive. An explanation is always necessary first, to demonstrate that reason and justice require that something be done to make up for the fault, that religion requires that some-

thing be done to compensate God for the offence, that true kindness requires that a parent not sit idle and tolerate wrongdoing. Once the educator has taken the time to explain all these things, the child who is used to corporal punishment will readily accept what he deserves. In fact, he will be greatly relieved that by a brief spanking he can make up for the thoughtless or silly fault and for the problem he caused, and regain the affection of the educator. In such a case of an accepted and embraced corporal punishment, none of the contraindications given by St. John Bosco apply. There is no chance of rebellion. It is quite simply a case of just penance, applied by the parent or educator, and accepted by the child with very salutary effects. There is nothing more normal, for we all need to do penance, and we adults would be very happy to be able to do our penance in such a simple way. Sure, it is humiliating to be spanked, but if the child accepts the humiliation in acknowledgement of his fault, he will receive his reward, a return to the usual harmony and affection.

The problem arises if the child refuses to acknowledge his fault, or refuses to be sorry for it, or refuses to accept that it is reasonable and just to be punished for it, or refuses to accept that it is the best way to make up to God. It is in such cases that corporal punishment does not work, but instead creates a very rebellious attitude. It can happen in those who have no sorrow for their fault, or who are not used to being spanked. In such cases, other means of discipline must be used. It is in such cases that St. John Bosco's very precious wisdom must be applied. Self discipline can then only be acquired voluntarily. Consequently, other persons are to be contacted to help the child to understand, other ways of explaining are to be tried, motives of religion are to be applied, other means of obtaining sorrow are to be investigated, other privileges are to be withdrawn that will not build up resentment, but will be accepted as just. Yes, it is true, children ought to be spanked, and with firmness, but when they are very young, more sparingly as they grow older, and once they have attained the use of reason only when they understand and accept the reasons for the spanking, and always with patience, justice and affection, never with anger or harshness.