



Should Schools Be Allowed to Hit Students?

How a Catholic School Childhood Convinced Me That Fear Is No Way to Educate Children

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Should the education system allow teachers and principals to hit students if they are misbehaving in class?

Growing Up in a Culture of Fear

As a former victim of corporal punishment during my early Catholic school days, I know how it feels to be struck—slapped, paddled, and even belt-whipped—by people in authority who were supposed to nurture and educate me. Instead, they terrorized me and taught me self-defense mechanisms centered on repression, timidity, and a fear of becoming the center of attention.

Back in the bad old days, "misbehaving in class" really wasn't much of an issue. We were simply too terrified to act out.

The system worked through fear. A student might eventually crack under the pressure and mistreatment of a particularly abusive nun and lose it, or someone would misbehave in secret—throwing a spit ball, for example—which often resulted in collective punishment designed to force the guilty party to confess.

The Great Spit Ball Investigation

I remember one such incident. Sister Mary Trampoline (not her real name—but she was my psycho fifth-grade teacher) kept all the boys after school. She simply couldn't believe that a girl could have thrown the offending spit ball.

As we boys remained behind to face the music, I distinctly remember a girl named Alice smiling and winking at us as she walked out the door.

For those too young to remember, a spit ball was created by chewing a piece of paper, soaking it with saliva, rolling it into a little ball, and launching it at an unsuspecting victim. Adding mucus to the concoction made it especially memorable when it struck the back of someone's neck.

Anyway, Sister insisted that the culprit confess.

I never figured out how she even knew a spit ball had been thrown. Perhaps it was the miraculous peripheral vision gained only through hours of prayer and meditation.

Whoever actually launched it wisely kept quiet, and no one was about to rat out even his worst enemy to Sister Mary Trampoline, a woman with hands like a blacksmith and the squat, fierce appearance of a female Danny DeVito.

As the clock crept toward supper time and our detention began cutting into Sister's evening prayers and devotions, she grew increasingly frustrated.

Unable to extract a confession, she finally ordered all of us boys to kneel and recite an Act of Contrition, begging God's forgiveness for our sinful

shenanigans. We gladly complied because it was approaching six o'clock. School had ended at 3:30.

Since I was innocent, I remember wondering how God felt about my asking forgiveness for something I hadn't done—and which wasn't really a sin in the first place. Was reciting an Act of Contrition for a crime I didn't commit a sort of false confession? Would it count against me on Judgment Day?

After all, hadn't Jesus endured far worse than spit balls?

In my childhood innocence, I eventually chalked Sister's behavior up as just another one of those "Mysteries of Faith" she was forever talking about—somewhere in the same category as the Virgin Birth, the Blessed Trinity, and Jesus' really cool miracle of walking on water.

My First Taste of Corporal Punishment

My earliest experience with being hit, however, had to do with Jesus' mother, Mary. It happened four years before the infamous spit ball incident. I was in first grade, walking back to school after lunch. Across the street stood a small garden grotto containing a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A few classmates and I decided to play tag in the area. I didn't know the grotto was off limits. Mary herself didn't seem to mind. She smiled beatifically upon us happy, frolicking children.

Sister Mary Nicotine (again, not her real name) was considerably less amused. She came charging toward us like a robed Bull Connor, rounded us up, and marched us into custody.

To appreciate the authority these women exercised over us, it's worth remembering how they appeared. They belonged to the Sisters of Notre Dame. They wore long black habits and large veils that extended over their heads and shoulders. Around their waists hung enormous rosaries with beads the size of marbles.

To small children, they seemed almost superhuman. They scared the hell out of us.

There we stood in the lunchroom like a gang of juvenile criminals awaiting sentencing. After conferring with Sister Mary Gasoline (also not her real name), Sister Mary Nicotine announced our punishment.

Each child—boys and girls alike—would receive one swat on the backside with a paddle.

I'll never forget the humiliation and dread as we lined up. One by one we leaned over a chair while Sister administered justice.

One little girl wet her pants. It remains one of the saddest and cruelest things I have ever witnessed.

Oddly enough, I also experienced a strange glow of martyrdom as I "took one on the cheek" for the Blessed Virgin Mary—a truly cruel mistress who may well have ratted us out, which, of course, we little sinners surely deserved.

What Corporal Punishment Really Teaches

Based on my own experiences—and considering the psychological damage caused by striking children—I believe corporal punishment has no place in education.

Ironically, it does teach children something. It teaches them that authority is best exercised through the threat of physical violence.

Because many of the nuns also seemed to use hitting as an outlet for their own frustrations, I also learned another lesson: violence becomes an acceptable response to anger.

That lesson is not lost on bullies.

Too often, yesterday's victim becomes tomorrow's abuser, continuing the cycle of intimidation with his own children or those under his authority.

A Lesson Schools Should Leave Behind

Today, in an age of greater psychological understanding—and lawsuits—teachers and principals who assault students expose themselves and their schools to enormous legal and moral liability.

If I had known then what I know now, I might have avoided a few slaps and paddlings simply by telling the nuns I would not accept being hit.

Of course, had I actually tried that, I probably would have received an even harsher punishment.

Something like writing:

"Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee..."

...about a million times on endless rolls of old wallpaper that Sister Mary Listerine (not her...uh...you know) kept in reserve for students who were either too smart—or too big—to hit.