Corporal Punishment and the American Identity

Around the world, Americans have the reputation of being soft with their children. There are internet memes and jokes around the world mocking American children, presenting them as whiny, first-world brats whose parents and teachers never say “no” to them. Tourists from Asia or other parts of the world are warned to avoid slapping or smacking their children while visiting the United States, as this could result in legal consequences. Though it is not obvious, this is largely contrary to the longstanding reputation of the United States throughout most of the country’s history. Furthermore, statistics show that this stereotype is inconsistent with how the overwhelming majority raise their children. While the American media, academia, child-rearing classes, and almost every public voice opposes punishing children physically, Americans simply disagree, and continue to disagree, despite being bombarded with the opposing viewpoint.

Americans Believe in Spanking

Corporal punishment is something the majority of Americans still favor. A poll in 2014 showed that 65% of women, and 76% of men agreed with the statement that sometimes a child needs a “good hard spanking.” The millennial generation, often labelled as more liberal and undisciplined than previous generations, actually favors corporal punishment at a slightly higher rate than its elders. Every US state has a law on the books specifying that while child abuse is not permitted, corporal punishment remains the protected right of parents.
A man in Indiana recently became a social media sensation after volunteering to give “free ass whoopins.” Yahoo News, Huffington Post, and many other outlets documented how widely praised the retired autoworker’s political statement about the need for harsher discipline was.

Though it is widely unknown, the fact is that the USA remains one of the only western countries to permit corporal punishment of students by their teachers in public schools. 19 US states still allow, not only parents, but teachers to strike their students as punishment in government educational institutions. In addition to the 19 states allowing it in public schools, almost every US states permits it for private schools.

School corporal punishment is almost completely unheard of New England and California, but in Mississippi, Texas, Alabama and many other states it is part of everyday life in the classroom. Parents usually sign a form permitting their children to be spanked. The procedure is carried out away from the classroom in the office of a school administrator, with a witness present for legal protection.

The punishment is almost always applied to the student buttocks. High school aged students often tweet about getting “paddled” or “swats” at school. On social media, students in the US nonchalantly describe bruising, lingering pain, and even joke about it being “hard to sit down.”

Concealed Remnants of Americana

All of this is strongly rooted in American history. The reputation of the country was one of descendants of pioneers, who believed in “God, Guns and Guts.” The attitudes portrayed in cowboy movies, with statements like “Go West Young Man” is certainly not considered politically correct any longer, but it is not dead. American literature is filled with nursery rhymes, folk tales, and poetry reminiscing about the righteousness of corporal punishment. The beloved American writer, Mark Twain’s novels, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn contain many episodes of whippings being carried out by teachers and parents, presenting the occurrence as trivial and in some cases almost humorous.

In 1946, Dr. Spock, the famed child psychologist whose writings became practically required reading for US parents following the Second World War wrote: “The American tradition of spanking may be one reason there is much more violence in our country than in any other comparable nation.” His comments were widely controversial at the time, because this “American Tradition” was deeply embedded in the culture and considered to be a large part of the American identity. Even long after his death, figures like Dr. James Dobson among others present Spock as a crackpot who “ruined the country” with his advocacy of non-authoritarian parenting.

However, it’s noteworthy that America has been at war 93% of the time – 222 out of 239. Which means that the US has only been at peace for 21 years total since its birth.

US President Lyndon Johnson worked as an educator long before his career in politics began. Lyndon Johnson was a Democrat whose reputation was rooted in his “war on poverty” and efforts to help low-income and non-white Americans. The fact that he left bruises on many children was seen as a further testament to his commitment to aid the downtrodden. As a teacher in Texas, Johnson oversaw a school of mainly Chicano and Mexican-American children and enforced a strict policy of paddling any child who spoke Spanish. At the time, his biographers did not view this as “cultural genocide.” Supporters of Johnson praised how strictly he enforced this policy, telling stories of lengths he went to spank any child or teenager who uttered so much as a word of Spanish.

Many of Johnson’s former students openly praised the policy as it forced them to become completely fluent in the English language, enabling them to be more successful as adults. One of the students that Johnson spanked even boasted about it on a TV game show, much to the audience’s laughter and applause. Similar public statements in which adults thank their parents and teachers for beating them as children are widespread across the US. Across the USA, Americans wear “Wooden Spoon Survivor” t-shirts, boasting of their encounters with the preferred implement of maternal chastisement. When NFL player, Adrian Peterson, was arrested for leaving welts on his son after beating him with a tree branch (called a “switch” in southern American slang), social media was flooded with Americans praising him for utilizing physical punishment and calling for the charges against him to be dropped, as they eventually were.

A Gap Between US Public and US Media

The media, domestic literature, and child-rearing courses in the USA stand so far away from these widespread feelings. American media, American parenting books, American psychology courses, all echo a loud mantra against physical punishment. TV programs do not portray parents punishing their children in this way, and increasingly parents are being arrested or having their children removed for engaging in a very widespread discipline practice. The gap between actual public opinion and the voices purporting to represent US society, both domestically and around the world, is quite astounding when it comes to this particular issue. As much as “Americana” and the image of US society presented during the 1950s is seen as being dead and gone, the sentiments behind it are very much
alive. This cultural gap is reminiscent of how international media gave the false impression that Trump could not be elected prior to the 2016 vote. The reality is that voices who claim to speak for Americans are simply out of touch with how everyday Americans think, feel, and raise their children. Spanking is one aspect of the “American Identity” so bemoaned by liberals and globalists, that remains very widespread and alive, despite no longer being given a voice in the media. Robert Smith is an independent American researcher and analyst that specializes in social psychology and conflict resolution. He writes especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”