

Spanking sparks debate — and legislation

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A preschool girl grabs a fistful of sand and fires it at close range in the face of another child.

A 2-year-old boy loses his temper and unleashes a kick on a nearby playmate.

These are scenes unfolding at Serrania Ave. Park in Woodland Hills on a sunny Monday afternoon.

Neither child is punished with a spanking, by their mothers' choice. But a new measure proposed in Sacramento aims to take that choice away, making slaps on the backside a crime punishable with jail time.

Sylvia Dennis of Winnetka says she finds time-outs effective for Natalie 4, and Ryan, 1 1/2 — one minute of isolation for every year of the child's age.

She said if the new bill preventing spanking of children under 4 becomes law, she probably would confront a parent who spansks a young child in public.

"If I think it's too aggressive, I would say something ... to the parent," Dennis said.

Spanking has been a touchy subject for decades, particularly since the 1940s when author Dr. Benjamin Spock suggested ending the practice.

Opponents say it only spurs violent behavior in children, while those who favor spanking say it doesn't cause injury and is more effective than stern words alone.

"Early childhood teaching requires parental discipline — spanking if need be — but always balanced with kindness and love," says Northridge grandmother Joan Benson, 75.

"To spank when needed tells the child that you love them enough to care about the way they choose to behave," she argues.

Benson admits that she spanked her own two children when they were young, though she never spanked her four grandchildren.

"That's up to their parents," she says.

The anti-spanking law planned by Assemblywoman Sally Lieber, D-Mountain View, has become the diaper-muffled swat heard 'round the world, garnering news coverage as far away as Britain and India.

Under its draft terms, it would force police officers and prosecutors to join pediatricians and child psychologists in the effort to stop parents from spanking small children. And it would make spanking a misdemeanor punishable with up to a year in jail and a fine of \$1,000 — although first-time offenders most likely would be sent to parenting classes.

Experts seem to agree that children under 4 generally don't get the message that parents aim to convey with a swat on the behind.

"The children don't have the cognitive skills to understand that they're being hit or spanked or slapped for a reason," says Charlotte Reznick, former UCLA Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology. "They just know they're being hit, and it hurts....And it teaches them that when you're bigger, you can use physical power against someone else."

Either way, she said, the choices in this debate are not limited to sparing the rod or going to jail.

"Not hitting a child doesn't mean not disciplining a child or setting limits, which is very important," she said.

Legal experts say child welfare laws already on the books protect kids from physical abuse, and that the proposed legislation could do more harm than good.

"One certainly doesn't want to create more opportunities for further (government) intrusion, arbitrary intrusion or unpredictable intrusion into the family," said Robert Goldstein, a UCLA law professor who specializes in child welfare.

He said the bill might garner more support if it applies to infants alone.

The moms at Serrania park had their own reservations about enforcement.

Asked if she would report a case of public spanking, local mom Tali London hesitated.

"I don't know," she said while watching 2 1/2-year-old son Dylan. "If I would see somebody driving drunk, I would call 911 because they could hurt someone. But (spanking) could be a parent's right."

Dennis said the legislation may not be practical.

"Behind closed doors, people do whatever they want," she said.

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