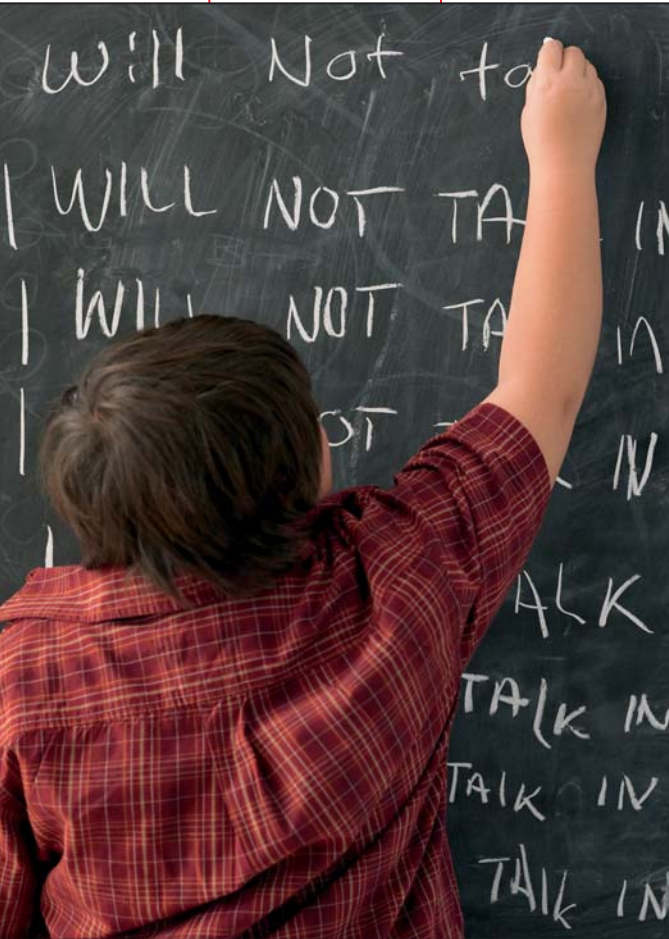


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When discipline crosses the line

Discipline, corporal punishment and physical abuse are all very different and very real ways schools and day care centers are choosing to reprimand today's youth. What types of behaviors and actions cross the line and how can you ensure your facilities and faculty are acting within reason and the law? Consider the following examples:

A day care director picks up a toddler by her arm and breaks it; a pastor disciplines a young child with several swats; or a teacher disciplines a boy with several strikes of a tree branch.

Although these acts of discipline appear extreme, they are factual and resulted in legal action.

Discipline within schools is governed by individual state laws. Although most state laws share zero tolerance for physical abuse and school violence, those permitting corporal punishment allow for much more severe forms of discipline. Currently, 22 states allow some form of corporal punishment, while 28 states have banned the practice. Corporal punishment is any deliberate striking or application of an object or body part against the body or any other physical punishment used as a corrective measure against a student.

Views on corporal punishment vary — some parents and administrators feel it is an effective means of discipline, although others believe it borders on physical abuse. In the 2002 - 2003 school year, more than 300,000 school children in the United States were subjected to physical punishment.

Developing discipline guidelines

Debbie Graves Ratcliffe, director of communications for the Texas Education Agency, stresses that protecting your day care facilities and schools begins with establishing clear behavior expectations and guidelines that fall within state laws and then communicating the policy to all appropriate parties.

"Our discipline committee meets during the summer to review the current policy and address any issues," said Pat Ihmels, assistant principal of operations for Stevenson High School in Stevenson, Ill. "The committee will update the policy and then review the new plan with our faculty and staff."

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Julie Robinson, headmaster of Greenville Christian School, a prekindergarten through 12th grade school in Greenville, Texas, holds a discipline orientation for all staff prior to the start of each school year.

"We share our discipline plan with the faculty and encourage feedback and input. Beyond our overarching discipline plan, we believe in tailoring discipline to the teacher and the students," Robinson said. "Each teacher is required to develop a management structure for their classroom. The management structure addresses how inappropriate behavior will be dealt with on a classroom level."

Once faculty and staff are comfortable with the student code of conduct, Ratcliffe encourages school districts to share the plan with parents.

"In addition, guidelines for discipline should always be included in the student code of conduct handbook," Ratcliffe said.

"Parents and teachers meet during school orientation to discuss discipline policies and the classroom management plan," Robinson said. "A student handbook is also distributed to the parents and is available on the Web site."

"Our students must read and study the student guidebook covering discipline policies and then pass a written test on the material," Ihmels said.

Discipline that works

Many administrators agree the best way of dealing with school misbehavior is by preventing it through teaching appropriate behavior and coping skills.

Robinson explains their school discipline philosophy stems from the word "disciple." The school's discipline practices vary by age group and do include corporal punishment.

"Discipline begins in the classroom with the teacher addressing an inappropriate behavior and asking for change, next the teacher will solicit parent help for making the change and finally the student will be referred to the Director of Discipline for punishment," Robinson said.

"We have found that tailoring our methods of punishment to the different age levels is most effective with our students," Robinson said. "For example, corporal punishment is generally only used with students elementary age or younger, our middle school students use a 'punch-card' system to address discipline issues

and detention is employed for both middle and high school students."

And corporal punishment is the very last resort for discipline at the school.

"When enforcing corporal punishment, we follow a strict sequence of events to protect both the child and the school," Robinson said. "When corporal punishment is deemed suitable, the parent is called on the day of to approve of the punishment. The parent is actually required to be on-premise to administer swats with a wooden paddle themselves or, at the very least, witness the punishment. When swats are given, the teacher, athletic director, headmaster and parent are all present in the room. We also offer suspension as an alternative to corporal punishment. However, we have found corporal punishment to be very effective."

Stevenson High School uses a flexible discipline plan with zero tolerance for physical abuse or corporal punishment.

"Our plan is based on consequences for inappropriate behavior," Ihmels said. "Inappropriate behavior results in the loss of a privilege, such as a parking spot or off-campus lunch, and finally in-school suspension."

Protecting your facilities

"The goal of discipline is to maintain a safe and orderly classroom while providing education to each student," Ratcliffe said. "In doing so, each school district, school and faculty member needs to rely on common sense for appropriate and inappropriate discipline behaviors."

Special guidelines should be followed in schools and day cares that administer corporal punishment:

- Publish corporal punishment policy and obtain written permission from parents
- Consider asking parents to do the paddling and always have at least one adult witness present
- Never administer punishment that is excessive, unduly severe or humiliating
- Consult your insurance policy to ensure your school is covered for any corporal punishment incident
- Review state and local laws

"Communication with the parents is also important. Our teachers do a lot of counseling to the parents about dealing with discipline at home and in school," Robinson said. "We strongly encourage constant supervision at school. We find supervision greatly reduces our need for discipline at all."

- **For more information** on current corporal punishment laws in your state, go to the Center for Effective Discipline Web site, www.stophitting.com, select "Discipline at School."

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A Perspective

Dr. Kevin S. Boys graduated summa cum laude from the University of Cincinnati, received his Master's degree in education from Xavier University and earned his doctorate degree at Miami University.

Prior to his appointment as superintendent of Loveland Schools,

Dr. Boys served as teacher, elementary principal, junior high school principal and



assistant superintendent in neighboring Sycamore Community Schools in Ohio.

This is his 28th year serving these two communities in the field of education and his fifth year as superintendent of Loveland Schools.



Risk Reporter: How is student discipline handled in your district?

Boys: We aim for a positive approach to maintain appropriate behavior. I have always believed that children will rise to the expectations set for them if you clearly communicate those expectations and hold students accountable. Accountability can be maintained by both positive and negative consequences, however, using positive approaches usually has the benefit of a positive and more productive school climate. We reserve the more serious consequences, such as suspension and expulsion, for more serious issues. Discipline should also be age-appropriate.

Risk Reporter: How has discipline changed over the years, and why do you think it has changed?

Boys: In my own schooling, corporal punishment was widely used, as was frequent punishment. Our school district opted to eliminate corporal punishment years ago. The most apparent change has been the emphasis on positive behavior support. We emphasize catching kids doing the right things and establishing logical consequences when they don't. Good teachers find a way to motivate students. For example, we have several teachers who use a "mock economy" as a classroom management tool. Students receive "money" for doing their "jobs" (such as coming to school) and meeting the expectations, and they pay money for not meeting the expectations.

Risk Reporter: Do you think parents are more or less involved today, and how do you try to involve parents?

Boys: We are fortunate to have involved parents. We view parents as vital partners and communicate regularly regarding student progress, using tools such as weekly grade reports and e-mail. In matters of discipline, parents can be very helpful in improving student conduct when they work with the schools.

Risk Reporter: How does your school protect itself against lawsuits?

Boys: A school district must have appropriate policies and procedures in place as well as people in the schools at all levels that are prudent in their daily work. Ongoing training of employees is also important.

Risk Reporter: Do you think legal issues surrounding discipline scare schools into not handling the issue?

Boys: I do not think the legal issues are a hindrance if you are committed to following laws specific to student discipline. States have very specific due process requirements when formal discipline is used. Schools that are conscientious about following the due process requirements will generally prevail in matters involving student discipline. The courts are reluctant to usurp the authority of schools to maintain discipline.