News You Can Use
To spank or not to spank?
UT Extension responds to the NFL’s experiences with child abuse

The information below is not legal or moral advice, but rather intends to provide guidelines crafted and supported by child development and parenting experts with The University of Tennessee Extension.

Like too many families and communities, members of the National Football League (NFL) are facing alleged child abuse in the form of a “spanking” that left marks on the child. According to the Child Trends 2013 data report, “Attitudes Toward Spanking” 94 percent of American parents with children ages 3-4 report having spanked their children in the past year, with males typically more likely to report that children “need a spanking sometimes.”

Mass media, recognizable sports figures and people commenting on social media are quick to explain that spanking is simply a part of southern culture, noting that “It’s just what we do. That’s how I was raised.” However, using children in hard labor environments also used to be ingrained in our culture and what previous generations did. But now we know better.

We now know that having children in early educational settings is better for them than working in harsh factory or mine settings. Likewise, we now know that there are more effective discipline techniques like restricting access to favorite objects or activities and having meaningful conversations with children. Part of the current national conversation about spanking is whether or not it’s effective. The clear and research-based answer is “NO.”

Matt Devereaux, professor and a child development specialist with UT Extension Family and Consumer Sciences, says that all we’re teaching children when we spank them is to stop that singular behavior. Instead, he notes the importance of teaching children alternative behaviors and helping them develop problem-solving skills. It is also important to help them understand how their behavior impacts others. All of this can occur through communication rather than physical reprimand. Sometimes spanking seems like an “easy” response, whereas communication with children about expectations can take longer and feel more challenging. Research says using forms of discipline other than spanking stops the behavior from repeatedly occurring and is healthier in the short- and long-term for children, parents and society. However, the reality is that many parents will continue to choose spanking as a discipline technique.

In that case, Devereaux suggests for parents to make a rule with themselves to wait 5 minutes before you spank your child. Those five minutes give you the time to calm down and think through other ways of responding to the child’s behavior. Oftentimes, when parents get to the point of wanting to spank, they are at
a point where some personal reflection time is helpful and healthy. Another technique is to craft a list of the “pros and cons” of spanking.
As parents work through creating the list they oftentimes find that choosing discipline techniques other than spanking is preferable.
Among the “pros” generally listed for spanking are:
● Spanking stops the behavior immediately.
● Spanking relieves parents’ frustration.
Among the “cons” of spanking are:
● Spanking hurts and scares the child.
● Spanking shows the child that hitting is an okay response.
● Spanking can be a “gateway” technique that may lead to harsher forms of discipline.
No matter what the form of discipline, it is never okay to willingly harm a child. Too many times does one “spanking” become more frequent and more aggressive.

To learn how to effectively parent without spanking contact your local UT Extension office, or connect with UT Extension’s Family and Consumer Sciences website online at fcs.tennessee.edu


To anonymously report suspected child abuse anytime day or night call 1-877-237-0004.

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For more information on this or other family and consumer sciences related topics, contact Shelly Barnes, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension agent for UT Extension in Wilson County. Barnes can be reached at sbarnes@utk.edu or 615-444-9584.