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Corporal punishment is still common in American schools. Here's why it should be banned.

a Florida case in which a school principal paddled a 6-year-old student still
ty in classrooms across the country.

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When news broke recently that a 6-year-old student was beaten with a wooden paddle by her school principal in Florida, many people likely had to double check that it wasn't a story from the 1950s.

In a sickening video, shot by the student's mother on her mobile phone, the child, who is crying, is bent over a chair. Principal Melissa Carter of Central Elementary School in Clewiston then hits the girl three times with a large paddle. The state attorney's office announced Friday that the principal did not commit a crime in beating the child.

Incidents like the Florida case, while seemingly relics of the past, still happen every day in classrooms across the country.

While it may shock many Americans, corporal punishment is still legal in public schools in about 20 states – with a majority of them in the South.

More than 160,000 children are subjected to corporal punishment in schools each year, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. The most vulnerable students are often the targets of this misguided form of discipline.

According to Human Rights Watch and ACLU data, students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to corporal punishment compared with other students. In fact, African American students, who account for 17.1% of public school students nationwide, made up for 35.6% of those who were paddled during the 2006-07 school year.

Students with disabilities, who make up 13.7% of all public-school students, accounted for 18.8% of students who were subjected to corporal punishment.

Those statistics are admittedly dated, and the frequency of corporal punishment thankfully has been in decline for decades. But its continued prevalence and its damaging long-term effects on children make the issue one of serious concern for child advocates and educators.

Paddling inflicts lasting harm

In recent decades, multiple studies on corporal punishment have found that physical discipline from authority figures severely harms a child's development and behavior.

For instance, a study that looked at the association between corporal punishment and different child behaviors and experiences found that parental corporal punishment was significantly associated with 10 negative child behaviors and experiences, including increased aggression, increased risk of physical abuse and increased anti-social, criminal and delinquent behavior as children and into adulthood.

Not only does corporal punishment affect children's behavior, but it is also linked to a decline in their academic performance. In a study looking at paddling and American College Testing scores, researchers found that states that paddled their students the most improved their scores the least, which eventually led to decreased school funding.

Another study found that exclusionary and harsh discipline practices in schools also decreased classroom time and academic performance in affected students.

And in our most recent research, CHILD USA has found that children who are maltreated have more social skills deficits, learning disorders and poorer academic performance. Victims of complex trauma – instances in which violence or abuse is repeated or ongoing – are especially likely to have worse grades and academic performance as a direct result of their abuse.

That is why we are launching a new project that will examine restorative justice practices in schools and its impact on academic outcomes. Through our research, we hope to find how restorative justice affects academic outcomes, and which components of restorative justice are most likely to produce the intended outcomes.

We know for a fact that corporal punishment is an outdated, ineffective form of discipline, and it is clear we need to adopt a more holistic, scientifically informed practice to support children as they cope and heal so they can start to learn again.

Congress should pass federal ban

The federal government should pass legislation prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in public schools, conditioned on the receipt of federal funding.

We also need more funding for schools so that children who are in need and coping with trauma can get the services they need.

Every day we go without addressing the issue of corporal punishment, another child is at risk of being harmed. It's past time to send a clear message that corporal punishment is abuse and is not the way to discipline our students.

All of society needs children to thrive, and we all pay when they don't. The lives of our children are at stake, and educators, administrators and lawmakers must take action to end this barbaric practice.

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