

Corporal Punishment in Beverly and Cambridge, MA: Just, or Just Plain Mean?

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Abstract

Corporal Punishment was the main factor for discipline in every school for centuries. It was practiced to keep children in line, but there are many cases where children were beaten brutally and parents took a stand against these heinous acts. Was corporal punishment the most efficient way to keep children in line or did it make them more chaotic? This was proven by various documents that discuss certain cases where teachers had taken advantage of their right to use corporal punishment on pupils. Even during the 1800s there was a fine line between corporal punishment and abuse, which as a result put teachers on trial. School reports traced the evolution of corporal punishment and when it ended. There are a few books published on the history of corporal punishment. These helped to show the significance of the history of corporal punishment because even though it is illegal in Massachusetts, it is still legal in twenty-three states today. They showed how corporal punishment came to a close in certain states, but did not affect other states. Corporal punishment seemed like it was an ancient form of discipline, when in fact it did not end until 1982 and is in some places still practiced. When corporal punishment was legal it was a major part of children's everyday education because when teachers inflicted physical pain on a student they became intimidated by the teacher and kept in line.

In 1866, at the Allston Grammar School in Cambridge, a major case of corporal punishment was addressed by the school committee. A teacher had struck a girl named Josephine Foster on the hands 15-20 times with a whip. The teacher's explanation was that she had been whispering and had been acting so disorderly that she had to be held down by another teacher and the principal. Mr. and Mrs. Foster felt that this brutal act of punishment was unnecessary and they brought the case to trial. In the end, corporal punishment was not abolished and the case was closed, but this was the first time people had spoken out against corporal punishment. This shaped a major turning point in the way teacher's treated their students.

Corporal punishment has existed since the beginning of man. In the Bible there are various scriptures that mention violence against children and how children should behave: "He that spareth the rod hateth his son, but he that loveth him chasteneth chronicles "God tells the Jews that if they fail to follow his commandments; then I will walk contrary unto you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. Any ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat." [1] This passage demonstrates that even in the Bible it was believed that if children did not behave they would be brutally penalized.

When the Puritans first settled in the Mass Bay Colony they believed that they were the chosen ones ,similar to the Hebrews who had believed that they were entering into the wilderness. The original intention of the early Puritan school was for children to learn to read the Bible. The Puritans believed that when children misbehaved, they needed to be taught a lesson. As the Bible played such a major role in everyday Puritan life, they used scriptures that advocated beating children to keep them in line. In Puritan churches children were often whipped with a rod for misbehaving, while adults would be lightly tickled with a feather. Many Christians believed in "the dogma of Eternal pain" [2] People who were highly religious believed children had to accept agony if they misbehaved. The Puritans felt by inflicting pain, the children would obey their parents as

well as God and the Government. This way everyone would know the rules and would share the same thoughts. Ideas expressed in the classroom that did not come from the Bible were deemed unacceptable.

Even though the Josephine Foster case was unsuccessful in abolishing corporal punishment in Cambridge, word quickly spread and parents in other towns began to speak out. In 1868 parents in Beverly, Massachusetts expressed the desire to rid their schools of corporal punishment, but the school committee's attitude was that if they gave into the parents wishes, their children would start to misbehave. How would discipline be enforced? "Abolishing corporal punishment would be abolishing civil government." (see [Appendix A](#)) As the years progressed, the school committee had more excuses to keep corporal punishment because without it they were afraid the children's behavior would become chaotic. In 1869, the Beverly school report on corporal punishment was concerned mostly with the qualification of the teacher or, in other words, how much experience or education they had. The report states that corporal punishment was rarely used because the teacher had more patience. The major rationale for inexperienced teachers was to use corporal punishment. One wonders if corporal punishment was usually only used by unqualified teachers, which could be found by looking at censuses of the teachers and their backgrounds. If the parents were complaining so much, just how many unqualified teachers were there? Beverly's final position on school discipline was simply "all teachers must govern" [3]

By 1871, a group of parents in Beverly were outraged because the schools would not compromise on the issue of corporal punishment by lessening the brutality in the school system. The parents thought it was a "relic of English barbarism"[4] Here is one example of how one-way corporal punishment is used. Child #1 is told to read and stutters on a word, then corrected. Child #2 stutters on the same word and is corrected. The teacher tells the children the next person to stutter on this word will be punished. Child #3 nervous and flustered that he/she will mess up on the word, and unfortunately pronounces

the word wrong and is beaten. The parents felt that this kind of action did not call for corporal punishment and was not significant, except to intimidate the child from wanting to read in class. Teachers felt that “even if the mistake was not made purposely, if scholars are going to be so forgetful and careless as that, they need something to make them remember!” The school committee was not about to change their position on corporal punishment, although their prevailing attitude was for corporal punishment to be used in only the most extreme cases. (see [Appendix B](#))

The Superintendent of the Cambridge schools attempted unsuccessfully to abolish corporal punishment in 1879. In 1880 the Cambridge school board felt that corporal punishment was being administered far too often. In all boys' grammar schools there were 12,976 boys attending the school and 10,973 incidents of corporal punishment was recorded. (Showing that 84 ½ percent of the time corporal punishment was being administered).[\[5\]](#)

This form of discipline was forbidden in colored schools and in some all- girls schools. In the girl's case, the reasoning was that they had a different mentality then boys, and when they were beaten it could be a long term affect on their life. In the case of colored schools, it was probably because they had been beaten so much in the south that the colored schools sought to avoid that approach to discipline. It seemed teachers had no problem beating white males. They felt it would make them manlier and the teachers believed that if young white males were faced with harsh discipline by their parents and teachers, the young men would grow up and do the same thing to their children so that corporal punishment could be passed down to each generation.

By the late 1800's corporal punishment was abolished in most parts of Europe, starting with Sweden, because they felt that corporal punishment was not a successful way to attain discipline in schools. Even places as close as New York started to resist the rod. New York was centuries ahead of Massachusetts in abolishing corporal punishment. On

May 18, 1870 New York state's Board of Education had a meeting to discuss a second attempt to abolish corporal punishment. The first time they approached the subject parent- groups were only partially successful. In 1865, they passed a by- law stating that only a principal or vice principal could inflict corporal punishment on the students. Any teachers using it would be immediately fired. The male teachers protested, showing that once again the males liked the idea of corporal punishment as their main tool for discipline. In one month alone in 1866 there was a 20% decrease in the number of disciplinary actions that employed corporal punishment . Although more children were attending school everyday, there was almost no corporal punishment administered in 1867. (However, in 1868 an increasing number of teachers refused to obey it). Corporal punishment ended for good in New York in 1877, mainly because schools began to realize that corporal punishment had an adverse affect on student discipline. Still Massachusetts did not see any advantages to abolishing it.[6]

Even though there was a domino effect of abolishing corporal punishment in other countries and states, Massachusetts was doing just the opposite to keep a firm grasp on their students. A justification of this refusal to change came on June 15, 1903 in Beverly, involving a young boy named Walter Woodberry, who had been attending Cove School. There was a hearing named "the School Committee vs. Mr. And Mrs. Woodberry". Walter had been misbehaving and the school resorted to corporal punishment and later suspension. The parents wrote a letter to the school requesting that Walter not be beaten if he was bad, and that the school, instead resort to some other form of alternative punishment. The school committee told the parents they could not grant this wish and whenever Walter was bad they would administer Corporal punishment , despite the parent's wishes. The teachers held moral authority over the parents, In those parents had little say in what they felt their child deserved for punishment, proving it was not unusual for the school to go against parental requests.(see [Appendix C](#))

Between 1906-1915, one grammar school in Beverly had an exceptional amount of corporal punishments. The Hardie School was located by the Beverly Common and later became Monserratt College of Art. The Hardie School had enrolled children that came from middle- to – upper class families and seemed to be quite motivated to learn, when looking at the graduation rate compared to other schools in Beverly. During these years most school would have around six to twelve incidents of corporal punishment per year. However ,one year the Hardie school had 29 when most schools had an average of eight. Even when there was a decrease in the number of cases for one year, Hardie was far above the curve in the corporal punishment rate. Although Hardie was seemingly stricter than the other grammar schools, there ironically is a correlation between the large number who were beaten and the number of children that successfully graduated. Their graduation rate may have helped teachers justify their adherence to corporal punishment. Not only they would say, did it make a child mature , it also made the children more studious and educated. (see [Appendix D](#))

Corporal punishment remained powerful in Massachusetts for 70 years. It was not considered appalling until the late seventies. Anti-corporal punishment groups started forming, and eventually in Massachusetts action was taken to finally make it illegal. “Corporal punishment” today seems like an ancient phrase to most people, when in fact it was not made illegal officially, until 22 years ago . The average person does not even realize that in the United States today there are still 27 states where corporal punishment is still legal and used more then people can imagine, especially in the southern states. Corporal punishment may never be abolished completely, but it is odd to think that in a state like Massachusetts, not only were our grandparent’s victims of corporal punishment; even our parents faced the symbolism of discipline through the paddle.

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Footnotes

1 Leviticus (Chronicles 28:3;33:6)

2 Report of the School Committee of the Town of Beverly for the Year 1870-71. Boston: Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1871.

3 Report of the School Committee of the Town of Beverly for the Year 1868-69. Beverly: Office of the "Citizen", 1869.

4 Report of the School Committee of the Town of Beverly for the Year 1870-71. Boston: Press of Rockwell and Churchill, 1871.

5 Annual Report of the School Committee of Boston, Mass., 1880. Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1881.

6 Reports on Corporal Punishment of New York. Board of education, 1877.