

THE WHIP, THE PADDLE, THE HICKORY SWITCH

Feb 23/08 Presentation for Black History Month Celebration, San Mateo Public Library, by Jordan Riak *Founder and Executive Director, Parents and Teachers Against Violence in Education(PTAVE)*

These are fascinating and exhilarating times. In the span of my own lifetime I've witnessed changes that only dreamers could have anticipated. I remember my school days of not-so-many years ago. I attended a racially segregated school, which was standard for those times. The only black people I knew, or thought I knew, were radio actors on the Amos 'N' Andy Show. In fact, those actors were white. I remember my early classroom teachers. They were all women. They held the highest professional rank that a woman could reasonably aspire to in those days. That was my world in the 1940s.

Well, here we are in election year 2008. Wow!

In these few minutes, I'm going to try to alert you to the unfinished business of the civil rights movement. I want to remind you, or convince you if you're skeptical, that until children receive full protection against being assaulted and battered, the legacy of the plantation era lingers. This should have a special meaning for parents who are the descendents of slaves. The field boss's whip reaches across the generations in the form of spanking, beating, switching, paddling, belting -- or whatever else one wants to call it. It tells the child, "You're worthless. You're getting exactly what you deserve, so get used to it." That message has its psychological roots in slavery.

Let's examine some evidence which I believe supports my claim. When you compare the statistics of school corporal punishment with the statistics of lynching, you discover that the top 10 states in each category include 7 states that appear on both lists. That's no coincidence. The states that share this dubious distinction are clustered around the Gulf -- the heartland of the old Confederacy. Other facts you should know about those states are: they rank among the worst in poverty, infant mortality, school drop-out, illiteracy, domestic violence and incarceration. Clearly, the heavy hitters pay a heavy price.

School corporal punishment reinforces, and is reinforced by, spanking at home. Schools that

allow it, typically offer the excuse that because parents spank, hitting is the only form of management those children understand. Some parents compound the mischief by urging teachers to use the paddle whenever they see fit -- which the paddlers are only too happy to do. The parents, then, feel reassured. Hitting naughty children must be right and proper if trained, licensed professionals do it too. One hand washes the other.

Two factors set this issue apart from other forms of civil rights violations and make it so difficult to resolve. 1) The victims are voiceless. Children only know what they have been exposed to. They can't imagine a different world. They have no language with which to protest. When they act out in response to mistreatment, that only sets them up for additional mistreatment. 2) The perpetrators of violence against children -- parents, teachers and other caretakers -- are so profoundly ashamed of their own conduct, and in such a state of denial, that they desperately cling to, and defend, the spanking tradition.

I sincerely hope that everyone here will join our campaign to bring the civil rights movement to its logical conclusion -- to liberate children from routine violent treatment disguised as something benign or beneficial. 104 countries have banned corporal punishment in schools. 24 countries have extended the ban to protect children at home -- 7 of them in the past year. And more are due to adopt the reform this year. Meanwhile, in the US, 21 states still let teachers batter students on their buttocks with flat sticks, and any talk of reining in parental violence is met with ridicule.

I've brought enough copies of our booklet, "Plain Talk About Spanking" with me today to go around. So please take one. You'll find in its 16 pages, a clear, honest assessment of the damage caused to children by the hitting habit. Since we first introduced this little publication in 1992, it has been in constant demand by enlightened educators and mental health professionals. If you work in a child-related field, and would like Plain Talk in quantity, just let me know. We'll supply you. Booklets are free. Plain Talk can also be read on our Web sites at www.nospank.net and www.thehittingstopshere.com.

If anyone has questions, comments or suggestions, I'm here to talk to you.

In conclusion, I'd like to share a brief anecdote which I hope you'll like. It's one of my favorites.

It's a description of the parenting style of President and First Lady Lincoln. Their housekeeper, Mariah Vance, tells this story:

The missus always seemed to favor Willie. She said, "Willie, precious, tell Mother what you and Taddie were doing."

Willie was smart, and he answered meekly, "We were only playing."

But the missus asked, "How playing? Tell me about the pipe and this smoke. Give me the pipe, Taddie."

Taddie held the pipe in back of him for a spell, and then finally shoved it toward her. The missus looked at it, smelled it, and said, "Come to Mother, boys."

Taddie boldly stepped forward, but Willie hung his head and lingered.

"Now, boys," she said, "I know you were playing, but this is an order from Mother. No more such playing."

"But Mother," Willie said, "those men at your party last night smoked and chewed and you didn't tell them to stop. Why should they have more privilege in our home than we have?"

She answered: "Men can choose or can limit themselves when it comes to vices. But little boys must be guided or directed by parents who love them. Your father would not do what he would not have his boys do. You know he would not want you to pattern yourselves after men who are careless about their habits. Don't you want to please your dear father?"

They both of course said they do. No spanking, no scolding. That was the way Mr. Abe and the missus managed those boys. I never saw anything like it, for those boys went back to making soap bubbles without another word.