Discipline

A summary of the scientific literature on discipline in education settings.



How This Impacts Children's Development

School corporal punishment can result in serious physical injuries and has also been linked with lower math and vocabulary achievement scores, as well as lower self-efficacy and self-esteem.

READ THE BRIEF: Informal exclusionary discipline practices in US schools, 2025

Talking Points from the SRCD Brief

- Corporal punishment is legal in 19 U.S. states, affecting over 160,000 children annually. Schools are one of the last public institutions where corporal punishment is legal, because of a 1977 U.S. Supreme Court case that ruled the practice was constitutional.
- Corporal punishment violates the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); with Somalia's ratification, the United States is the only UN member country that has not ratified the CRC. Most countries have banned corporal punishment.
- Most Americans (77%) oppose the use of corporal punishment in schools. While some states allow districts to define it, others provide a statewide definition. In Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi, half of students attend schools where corporal punishment is permitted. States that have removed corporal punishment from schools have not seen increases in juvenile crime.
- There are significant disparities in the administration of corporal punishment by race, gender, and disability status. Children with disabilities are more than 50% more likely to be punished than their nondisabled peers. Boys are five times more likely to receive corporal punishment than girls in at least 20% of districts. In Alabama and Mississippi, Black children are at least 51% more likely to be corporally punished than white children in over half of districts, with some districts seeing a 500% higher likelihood for Black children. Informal exclusionary discipline practices also disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds and students with disabilities.
- There is an excess of undocumented instances--such as sending children to the principal's office or telling a child to stay home--of informal exclusionary discipline practices in schools. These informal exclusionary discipline practices often result when educators lack the training and resources to meet children's holistic needs and often begin early in a child's educational trajectory.

Policy Considerations in the Brief

Federal Level

1. The U.S. Supreme Court could reconsider its 1977 ruling that school corporal punishment is constitutional, and Policymakers could continue considering legislation on ending school corporal punishment.

2. Federal agencies that protect students' civil rights should consider whether disparities in corporal punishment based on race, gender, and disability status violate federal law (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).
3. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) recommends that schools use discipline that is developmentally appropriate and proportional to the misbehavior, and that helps children learn from mistakes. ED should provide guidelines to school districts to reduce corporal punishment.
4. The US Department of Education (ED) and other relevant stakeholders should consider mandated tracking and reporting of informal exclusionary discipline measures from multiple stakeholders, such as administrators, teachers, and families.

State Level

1. States could revise statutes or regulations (typically in the education code) to end corporal punishment, and States that exclude school corporal punishment from definitions of child maltreatment could reexamine definitions.
2. States could implement child development evidence-based, culturally responsive classroom management training programs to better equip teachers with the tools to respond to students' behavioral needs.

READ THE BRIEF: Informal exclusionary discipline practices in US schools, 2025

READ THE BRIEF: Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools, 2016

Talking Points from the SRCD Brief

- Corporal punishment is legal in 19 U.S. states, affecting over 160,000 children annually. Data from 36,942 schools shows that Black children, boys, and children with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to this punishment, which typically involves striking a child's buttocks with a large wooden paddle.
- In 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school corporal punishment is constitutional, allowing states to decide whether to permit it. As a result, schools remain one of the last public institutions where corporal punishment is still legal.
- Corporal punishment violates the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); with Somalia's recent ratification, the United States is the only country that has not ratified the CRC. Most countries have banned corporal punishment.
- Most Americans (77%) oppose the use of corporal punishment in schools. While some states allow districts to define it, others provide a statewide definition. In Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi, half of students attend schools where corporal punishment is permitted. States that have removed corporal punishment from schools have not seen increases in juvenile crime.
- There are significant disparities in the administration of corporal punishment by race, gender, and disability status. Children with disabilities are more than 50% more likely to be punished than their nondisabled peers. Boys are five times more likely to receive corporal punishment than girls in at least 20% of districts. In Alabama and Mississippi, Black children are at least 51% more likely to be corporally punished than White children in over half of districts, with some districts seeing a 500% higher likelihood for Black children.

Policy Considerations in the Brief

Federal Level

1. The U.S. Supreme Court could reconsider its 1977 ruling that school corporal punishment is constitutional.
2. Policymakers could continue considering legislation on school corporal punishment, like the Ending Corporal Punishment in Schools Act of 2015 (H.R. 2268).
3. Federal agencies that protect students' civil rights should consider whether disparities in corporal punishment based on race, gender, and disability status violate federal law (Title VI of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

4. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) recommends that schools use discipline that is developmentally appropriate and proportional to the misbehavior, and that helps children learn from mistakes. ED should provide guidelines to school districts to reduce corporal punishment.

State Level

1. States could revise statutes or regulations (typically in the education code) to end corporal punishment, and in the meantime, allow parents to refuse its use on their children.
2. States that exclude school corporal punishment from definitions of child maltreatment could reexamine definitions.

READ THE BRIEF: Corporal Punishment in U.S. Public Schools, 2016