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Race, Religion, and Corporal Punishment in the ELCA's Social Message on Child Protection:

A Proposal for a Culturally Humble Approach to Reducing Physical Discipline Without a Disproportionate Impact Based on Race or Religion

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“There is a prophet within us, forever whispering that
behind the seen lies the immeasurable unseen.”

—Frederick Douglass³

Introduction

On November 12, 2025, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted a social message on child protection which made clear that all ELCA leaders, including volunteers, are expected to report abuse irrespective of whether or not state law requires them to report and

The ELCA social message statement directly addresses medical neglect practiced in the name of religion. This article focuses on those portions of the social message which strongly oppose the physical discipline of children as well as those portions of the message that call on both the church and the state to address racial disparities in the child welfare system.

this is also true of information about abuse received in the context of pastoral care or a confession.⁴ The ELCA social message also established minimal child protection standards including annual training for called workers and those interacting with children.⁵ The statement directly addresses medical neglect practiced in the name of religion,⁶ urges congregations to meet SAMHSA standards for being trauma-informed,⁷ recognizes the potential value

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3. David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

4. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *A Social Message on Child Protection* (2025), 22-23.

5. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 20, 30.

6. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 3-4.

7. Specifically, the social message states “this church calls itself to learn and practice effective responses to trauma and to exercise trauma-informed and healing-centered ministry” (18). This includes

of CAC chaplains,⁸ and engages theologically throughout the text.⁹

The purpose of this article, though, is to focus on those portions of the social message which strongly oppose the physical discipline of children as well as those portions of the message that call on both the church and the state to address racial disparities in the child welfare system. Since corporal punishment is used more frequently in some faith communities and in families of color, reducing corporal punishment and racial disparities in the child welfare system can be challenging. However, this article asserts both goals can be achieved simultaneously and offers concrete examples of how to do this.

Although this paper is primarily addressed to individuals involved in multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs), the arguments advanced should be of interest to a wide spectrum of professionals, including teachers and religious leaders as well as parents and others who interact with children. Since the ELCA social message on child protection also calls on the church to advocate for numerous public policy reforms,¹⁰ this paper may also assist every person of faith in advocating for strong policies in both the church and state to confront racism as well as practices that contribute to child physical abuse.

At the outset, the authors' position is that corporal punishment is never necessary and for many reasons, some of which are listed below, is a problematic child-rearing practice. That said, the authors recognize that the practice of hitting children as a means of discipline is deeply entrenched in some communities, regions, and faiths. With that in mind, we broach this complex topic with the goal of developing a culturally humble approach to this issue, which moves parents away from striking children as a means of discipline without a disproportionate impact based on race or religion.¹¹

ELCA social message statement on corporal punishment

The ELCA social message on child protection includes strong language opposing hitting children as a means of discipline. The ELCA noted that nearly one in four adults in the United States experienced physical abuse as a child and that the abuse "often starts as an attempt at discipline that escalates into harm that

a recommendation that "ELCA colleges, universities, and seminaries should find ways to provide trauma-informed care for students and trauma-informed training for emerging leaders" (19).

8. "This church also recognizes the important role of trained chaplains in addressing the spiritual trauma children can face both from their victimization and during investigations and court proceedings." ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 22-23.

9. For example, the social message includes a section on the "Church and Child Protection" and another on the "Elements of a Lutheran Theology of Childhood."

10. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 25-26.

11. See also Hazel Blum, "Reforming (but not eliminating) the parental discipline defense." *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 49 (2016): 921-948, noting that criminalizing corporal punishment in the home "would be disproportionately absorbed by the black community" (944).

The ELCA social message on child protection includes strong language opposing hitting children as a means of discipline. The ELCA noted that nearly one in four adults in the United States experienced physical abuse as a child and that the abuse "often starts as an attempt at discipline that escalates into harm that threatens the physical safety of the child."

threatens the physical safety of the child."¹²

The ELCA recognizes that "spanking or hitting" is "often rooted in family and religious culture and tradition."¹³ With respect to the influence of religion, the ELCA states "Some verses of the Bible—taken out of textual and historical context—have been used to justify or encourage physical abuse" and that "Religious descriptions of parental authority as absolute have left children feeling powerless when victimized."¹⁴

The ELCA asserts that Jesus' model of authority "counters punitive and abusive exercises of authority that some Christians base on biblical verses about the use of 'the rod' in Proverbs 22:15, 13:24. The use of 'the rod' in the Bible should be understood in the context of treatment of children that was, at times, brutal and inhumane."¹⁵ From this analysis, the ELCA issued the strongest statement yet from a Christian denomination on the subject of corporal punishment:

This church is called to address scriptural misinterpretations that have been used to justify violence and promote physical punishment of children. This arises from God's call for the whole body of Christ to model peace and for Christians to be peacemakers. Worshipping communities are called to be safe spaces, free of violence, where physical intimidation or the use of force—including physical discipline—are specifically prohibited.¹⁶

ELCA social message on racism, racial disparities and disproportionality

The ELCA social message also noted the influence of racism on the abuse of children and the resulting racial disparities in the child

12. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 4-5.

13. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 5.

14. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 10.

15. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 12.

16. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 17.

welfare system. Specifically, the social message says:

Racial and cultural bias and structural racism can also impact decisions to remove children from homes, despite federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination. Black children, for example, are twice as likely as white children to be removed from a home even when the circumstances of maltreatment are otherwise similar. Because of experiences of racism and discrimination, many parents of color are justifiably distrustful of law enforcement and child protection systems. This may make them less likely to seek help when they need it, fearful that asking for help may lead to punitive rather than supportive responses.¹⁷

The complexity of MDT responses to corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is a long-standing practice in the United States and this form of discipline continues all too often¹⁸ despite a significant amount of research finding that physical discipline is ineffective and may lead to harmful results.¹⁹ When responding to a report of child physical abuse, multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) must determine when corporal punishment exceeds what is permissible by law and, when physical discipline goes too far, the appropriate governmental response. When corporal punishment exceeds what is permissible by law, the authorities may choose to file a criminal complaint, to file a civil child protection petition, to offer voluntary services, or to take no action at all. In addition to being guided by current law, MDTs must also consider race, ethnicity, culture, religion and other factors that are associated with the practice and its frequency in some communities and regions of the country.²⁰ MDT members should also take into account how their own racial identity, religion, and other factors (e.g., personal views on banning corporal punishment) could influence their decision-making. MDTs who fail to take into account these

Corporal punishment in the home elevates the risks for poor outcomes, including child aggression, antisocial behavior, depression, anxiety, use of drugs and alcohol, psychiatric disorders, and poorer parent-child relationships.

complexities may contribute to institutionally and systemically driven racial, ethnic, and cultural disparities in both the civil child protection and criminal justice systems.

This article provides a brief overview of the research on corporal punishment and the civil and criminal law in the United States as it pertains to physical discipline. It highlights bias, cultural blindness, and other potential contributors to racial and other disparities when MDTs respond to these cases, and we propose several steps to improve this response.

Risks of corporal punishment

In July of 2016, the Association of Professionals Solving the Abuse of Children (APSAC) adopted a position statement that “opposes hitting children for discipline or other purposes.”²¹ This position is supported by a large body of research finding that corporal punishment in the home elevates the risks for poor outcomes, including child aggression, antisocial behavior, depression, anxiety, use of drugs and alcohol, psychiatric disorders, and poorer parent-child relationships.²² Although there are fewer studies on the effect of school corporal punishment, students who have “experienced corporal punishment are more likely to have lower academic achievement, poorer peer relationships, more difficulty concentrating, and more somatic complaints and resentment of authority, and are more likely to be truant and/or drop out of school.”²³ APSAC’s opposition to corporal punishment is informed not only by the research but also by professional position statements that oppose corporal punishment and contend there are better alternatives for child discipline. These include statements by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the American Psychological Association and numerous other organizations concerned with the well-being of children.²⁴

17. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 7.

18. Although corporal punishment is declining, a national survey published in 2019 still found that 49% of children below the age of nine were hit as a means of discipline during the previous year and 23% of youth ages 10-17 received corporal punishment in the prior year. David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, Brittany Kaye Wormuth, Jennifer Vanderminde, and Sherry Hamby. “Corporal punishment: Current rates from a national survey. 28 (7) *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 1991-1997 (2019).

19. Joan E. Durrant, “Corporal punishment: From ancient history to global progress” in R. Geffner, J. W. White, L. K. Hamberger, A. Rosenbaum, V. Vaughan-Eden, & V. I. Vieth (Eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: A project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan (NPEIV)* (343–365). Springer Nature Switzerland AG (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89999-2_13

20. Finkelhor and colleagues found that corporal punishment was lower for girls than boys, for families from the Northeast as opposed to the South, and “whites compared to blacks.” David Finkelhor, et al “Corporal punishment: Current rates from a national survey.” *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.

21. APSAC, *Position Statement Corporal Punishment of Children* (2016), 1.

22. Durrant, “Corporal punishment” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan* (343–365). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89999-2_13

23. Durrant, “Corporal punishment” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan*, 356.

24. APSAC, *Position Statement Corporal Punishment*, 2.

Corporal punishment and U.S. law

Although corporal punishment can lead to physical child abuse,²⁵ not every act of corporal punishment meets the legal definition of child abuse contained in civil and criminal codes. In the United States, the law in all fifty states permits parents to strike their children as a means of discipline provided the corporal punishment is “reasonable.” In determining reasonableness, courts consider the child’s age and size, the place on the child’s body where discipline is inflicted, the degree of injury or pain, the parent’s motive in hitting a child, whether the discipline is part of an overall pattern of violence, and the means used to inflict discipline (disciplining with objects is more likely to be frowned upon because of the increased risk of injury).²⁶ Some courts also consider the “nature of the misbehavior of the child being hit”²⁷ and thus leave open the possibility that, in some instances, even mild forms of corporal punishment may be unlawful.²⁸

Corporal punishment and race

The disproportionate use of school corporal punishment

As of 2022, nineteen states permitted school personnel in public schools to physically strike children as a means of discipline. In 2023, the governors of Colorado²⁹ and Idaho³⁰ signed legislation that bans physical discipline in public schools. In the states still permitting teachers and principals to physically strike children as a means of discipline, black children are much more likely to receive blows from school personnel.³¹ In Alabama and Mississippi, black children were 51% more likely to be hit than white children. In Georgia it is 28%, Florida 26%, Louisiana and Arkansas 18%, and Tennessee 17%.³² Boys and children with disabilities also disproportionately received school corporal punishment.³³

25. Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff, “Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: a meta-analytic and theoretical review.” *Psychological Bulletin* 128, no. 4 (2002): 539.

26. John E.B. Myers, *Myers on Evidence of Interpersonal Violence: Child Maltreatment, Intimate Partner Violence, Rape, Stalking, and Elder Abuse*. (5th ed). Wolters Kluwer, pages 262-269.

27. *Hamilton ex rel Lethem v. Lethem*, 270 P.3d 1024, 1038 (2012).

28. Victor I. Vieth, “From Sticks to Flowers: Guidelines for Child Protection Professionals Working with Parents Using Scripture to Justify Corporal Punishment.” *William Mitchell Law Review* 40(3): 907-942.

29. Nick Coltrain, “Gov. Jared Polis signs bills banning corporal punishment in schools, setting new rules on 48-hour jail holds.” *The Denver Post*, November 30, 2023, <https://www.denverpost.com/2023/04/20/colorado-bans-corporal-punishment-in-schools/>

30. Becca Savransky, “Corporal punishment, restraint and seclusion as discipline will be banned in Idaho schools.” *The Spokesman-Review*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2023/apr/07/corporal-punishment-restraint-and-seclusion-as-dis/>

31. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, & Sarah A. Font, “Corporal punishment in U.S. public schools: prevalence, disparities in use, and status in state and federal policy.” *Social Policy Report*, 30(1), (2016): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2016.tb00086.x>

32. Gershoff & Font, “Corporal punishment in U.S. public schools.”

33. Gershoff & Font, “Corporal punishment in U.S. public

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Child protection/criminal justice responses to corporal punishment & the risk of bias

In responding to child maltreatment, the child protection and criminal justice systems have committed to ethical codes³⁴ to be cognizant of and proactively work to address both racial disproportionality³⁵ and disparity.³⁶ This applies to how MDTs respond to reported cases of maltreatment involving physical discipline. As noted by the Children’s Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services:

Family practices that might be seen as abusive or neglectful by mainstream standards may have a cultural component that would define them differently by a caseworker of a different background. Commonly encountered cases involve different cultural views of corporal punishment and parents’ rights to discipline their children as they see fit. In cases in which children are being harmed, the role of agencies is to honor the intentions while educating the parents about the laws and reasons behind the laws and helping them identify other approaches.³⁷

In the United States, there are considerable racial and religious variations on the subject of corporal punishment. According to a 2015 Pew study, 14% of white Americans “often/sometimes” use corporal punishment, 28% rarely strike their children as a means of discipline, and 53% never use the practice. For Hispanic parents, the numbers are similar, with 19% often/sometimes using corporal punishment, 22% rarely employing the practice, and 58% never using this form of discipline. However, black parents use the practice at higher levels: 32% often/sometimes using physical discipline, 32% rarely using the practice, and 31% reporting they

schools.”

34. For a detailed summary of these ethical codes, see Appendix A.

35. Disproportionality is the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared with its percentage in the total population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

36. Disparity is the unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared with outcomes for another racial or ethnic group (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

37. Child Welfare Information Gateway, “Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity.” Children’s Bureau, United States Department of Health & Human Services (2021) <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/child-welfare-practice-address-racial-disproportionality-and-disparity/>

never use corporal punishment.³⁸

Research has found that theologically conservative Protestants are much more likely to support and use corporal punishment than other religious groups.³⁹ Research also finds that African Americans are the most religious demographic in the United States with a strong affiliation to conservative Protestantism.⁴⁰ In addition, for several reasons beyond the scope of this paper, non-Hispanic white children are underrepresented in the U.S. child welfare system.⁴¹ Given these demographics and realities, MDTs will be more likely to encounter cases of corporal punishment when they investigate allegations in African American and/or black families than they will in other communities, even if more non-Hispanic white children are being physically disciplined in the home.

Mild instances of corporal punishment cannot result in civil or criminal action under existing law, whereas egregious cases of physical abuse will likely result in governmental action irrespective of race or religion. However, mild cases could potentially trigger or prolong the State's monitoring and servicing efforts, with the possibility of noncompliance triggering greater monitoring by Child Protective Services (CPS) or even child placement outside of the home. Also, there is a risk that the handling of cases on the margin may result in exacerbating racial or religious disparities within the child welfare or criminal justice systems. Implicit bias, personal beliefs, and unethical practice related to culture are among the many factors contributing to this risk.

Disparities may occur on the front end as MDTs consider filing criminal charges, taking civil child protection actions, and/or removing children from their homes. For instance, one study found that although substantiation decisions by child protection professionals in cases of corporal punishment involving injury "do not appear to be influenced by overt biases" pertaining to the race or ethnicity of a family, the child protection professional's personal characteristics, "including race, educational level, and beliefs about the acceptability of corporal discipline impacted substantiation decisions in particular instances, suggesting that some substantiation bias exists in child protection evaluations."⁴²

A disproportionate impact can also happen in the placement

Child physical abuse must continue to be reported and, where appropriate, result in civil or criminal action. At the same time, MDTs must be cognizant of racial and religious demographics.

of a child or delivery of services. For instance, when children must be removed from the home, many child protection rules prohibit placing a child with a family member unwilling to forego physical discipline.⁴³ When this happens, communities with a greater use or acceptance of corporal punishment may experience family separation and non-kinship placements at higher levels.

Reducing disproportionality and disparity when responding to corporal punishment

Child physical abuse must continue to be reported and, where appropriate, result in civil or criminal action. At the same time, MDTs must be cognizant of racial and religious demographics in responding to cases involving corporal punishment. There are numerous steps that can be taken to address this issue ethically, sensitively, and in a manner that protects children while still respecting the diversity of the communities we serve and their rights.

First, MDTs must be culturally humble. This means more than reading an article or periodically attending a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) workshop.⁴⁴ Cultural humility requires us to regularly break bread with diverse communities and to dialogue about even the most difficult subjects. In learning more about the lived experiences of others, we can approach these subjects much more sensitively.

As one example, one of the authors presented a workshop on corporal punishment research including studies finding that physical discipline is ineffective long-term, although it may stop a child's behavior in the moment. An African American pastor in the audience responded that although he thought the research made sense, it was important for the speaker to understand that he (the

38. Pew Research Center, *Parenting in America* (2015). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/>

39. John P. Hoffmann, Christopher G. Ellison, & John P. Bartkowski. "Conservative Protestantism and attitudes toward corporal punishment, 1986–2014." *Social Science Research*, 63 (2017): 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.010>

40. A 2014 study found that black Americans are more likely to be Christian than Americans overall, with 53% of African Americans affiliated with historically black Protestant churches, 14% affiliated with Evangelical Protestant churches, 4% affiliated with Mainline Protestantism, and 5% Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2014).

41. Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity."

42. Jason F. Jent, Cyd K. Eaton, Lauren Knickerbocker, Walter F. Lambert, Melissa T. Merrick, & Susan K. Dandes, "Multidisciplinary child protection decision making about physical abuse: Determining substantiation thresholds and biases." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(9), (2011): 1673–1682. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.029>

43. See California Department of Social Services, "Agency-foster parents agreement(2025), Retrieved February 5, 2025, from <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/Forms/English/SOC156.pdf>; Knotts Family Agency (n.d.). "How do you discipline a foster child?" Retrieved February 5, 2025, from <https://knottsfamilyagency.org/how-do-you-discipline-a-foster-child/>; Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (2017). "Child protective services handbook" (2017) https://www.dfps.texas.gov/handbooks/CPS/Files/CPS_px_6000-2.asp; Pennsylvania Children in Foster Care Act P.L. 1264, No. 119 (2010). <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/LI/US/HTM/2010/0/0119..HTM>

44. Through executive orders and the withholding of funds, the Trump administration has eliminated DEI training and policies from programs receiving federal grants. <https://govfacts.org/rights-freedoms/civil-rights-equal-protection/anti-discrimination/trump-on-dei-a-policy-revolution/>

pastor) was old enough to remember lynching and the very real possibility that a young person who was perceived as looking at a white woman in the wrong way could be murdered.⁴⁵ In light of high profile police shootings of African Americans, the pastor said “I may only have a few minutes to get through to my son and make sure he survives the night.”

Listening—really listening—to voices such as these is critical if we are to achieve the twin goals of protecting children while also avoiding family separation and a racially disproportionate impact of MDT decisions. This is not only important for families of color, but for all families. When structural racism and implicit or explicit bias increase the likelihood of responding to alleged maltreatment and deciding to substantiate abuse in families of color, the same forces may lead us to overlook instances of physical or other maltreatment in white families or other communities. The ELCA social message on child protection specifically notes this possibility.⁴⁶

Therefore, cultural humility is key. It would be incorrect to assume that one’s personal cultural understanding of alternatives to corporal punishment reflects what all communities have had an equal opportunity to discover, learn, understand, practice, and fail at until proficient. Biased decisions may prolong or progress a family’s involvement in the system, and the resulting destabilization of the family may erroneously produce false confidence in the system response.

Second, MDTs must grow their knowledge of religious and theological frameworks that support corporal punishment—and work sensitively and compassionately with families holding these world-views. We know from research that simply lecturing on corporal punishment research findings are unlikely to change a parent’s belief in corporal punishment when the parent sincerely believes God requires physical discipline. At the same time, we know that a culturally sensitive approach, which compassionately responds to this dynamic, can have a positive impact.⁴⁷ The Academy on Violence & Abuse published guidelines to assist MDTs in responding to this dynamic, and APSAC also published a relevant article,

Cultural humility requires us to regularly break bread with diverse communities and to dialogue about even the most difficult subjects. In learning more about the lived experiences of others, we can approach these subjects much more sensitively.

and readers are referred there to learn more.⁴⁸

A national study found that many Children’s Advocacy Centers and MDTs have little or no working relationships with area faith communities.⁴⁹ Given the importance of faith leaders in addressing the religious arguments often used to justify corporal punishment, as well as the potentially important role of faith communities in supporting families, both faith and child protection leaders need to find ways to work together.

Third, every MDT member must recognize they have biases—and proactively take actions to limit the possibility that bias may lead to poor or wrongful decisions. As one simple step, every member of an MDT can take the Harvard Implicit Association Test to aid in assessing and helping to recognize our individual biases.⁵⁰ We should also work to make sure our MDTs have a diverse composition and reflect the communities we serve. Having multiple perspectives can result in better decision-making in cases of child protection on which reasonable minds may differ.⁵¹

Fourth, we must dramatically improve undergraduate and graduate training of future child protection professionals and must shift the training of MDTs in the field to emphasize experiential training. A long-standing problem among all professions that service children and families is that undergraduate and graduate programs have provided limited and inadequate education in responding to child

45. The pastor was referencing the murder of Emmet Till. For more about the killing of Till, and the impact the case has had on American history, see Jon Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*, (New York, NY: Random House 2020), 37-38, 98.

46. “The lack of attention to maltreatment in affluent families and barriers to effective intervention can make it difficult for children in affluent families to get the support they need.” ELCA, *A Social Message on Child Protection*, 6.

47. Robin Perrin, Cindy Miller-Perrin, and Jeongbin Song. “Changing attitudes about spanking using alternative biblical interpretations.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 41, no. 4 (2017): 514-522; Cindy Miller-Perrin, and Robin Perrin. “Changing attitudes about spanking among conservative Christians using interventions that focus on empirical research evidence and progressive biblical interpretations.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 71 (2017): 69-79; Robin Perrin and Cindy Miller-Perrin, “Research Initiatives Designed to Reduce Positive Attitudes Toward Spanking Among Conservative Christians.” *APSAC Advisor* 38(4): 26-33 (2025).

48. Academy on Violence and Abuse. (n.d.). *Working with parents & caregivers who use scripture to justify corporal punishment*. https://www.avahealth.org/file_download/inline/7a31512c-b972-4d03-941a-d8e9248b77cb; Victor I. Vieth, “Working with Molly: A culturally sensitive approach to parents using corporal punishment because of their religious beliefs.” *APSAC Advisor*, 31(1): 52–58 (2019).

49. Theodore P. Cross, Victor Vieth, and Elizabeth M. Cross. “Spiritual care in Children’s Advocacy Centers: Results of a Survey of CAC Directors.” *Children and Youth Services Review* (2026): 108767 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740926000204>

50. Project Implicit, see <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

51. A “team approach to assessment that emphasizes diversity in professional position or discipline, gender, and experience level is likely to...counterbalance individual biases.” Mark D. Everson and Jose Miguel Sandoval, “Forensic child sexual abuse evaluations: assessing subjectivity and bias in professional judgements.” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35(4): 287–298 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.01.001>

abuse—including DEI issues.⁵²

There is a movement in the United States called Child Advocacy Studies, or CAST, which is designed to provide much more rigorous training for future child protection professionals at both the collegiate level as well as in medical schools, law schools, and seminaries.⁵³ This reform has been implemented in more than 100 universities or graduate programs in every region of the country with early research showing the reforms are producing better educated, more skilled child protection professionals.⁵⁴ Research from the University of Illinois finds that CAST students do a better job of not under- or overcalling child protection cases and appear to be more culturally aware than non-CAST students.⁵⁵

52. Maureen C. Kenny, and Roberto L. Abreu. “Training mental health professionals in child sexual abuse: Curricular guidelines.” *Journal of child sexual abuse* 24, no. 5 (2015): 572-591; Michele Knox, Heather Pelletier, and Victor Vieth. “Educating medical students about adolescent maltreatment.” *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* 25, no. 3 (2013): 301-308; Michele S. Knox, Heather Pelletier, and Victor Vieth. “Effects of medical student training in child advocacy and child abuse prevention and intervention.” *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy* 6, no. 2 (2014): 129; Victor I. Vieth, “Unto the third generation: A call to end child abuse in the United States within 120 years (revised and expanded).” *Hamline Journal of Public Law & Policy* 28 (2006): 1; Janice R. Hill, “Teaching about family violence: a proposed model curriculum.” *Teaching and learning in medicine* 17, no. 2 (2005): 169-178; Kelly M. Champion, Kimberly Shipman, Barbara L. Bonner, Lisa Hensley, and Allison C. Howe. “Child maltreatment training in doctoral programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology: Where do we go from here?” *Child Maltreatment* 8, no. 3 (2003): 211-217; Anne M. Woodtli, and Eileen T. Breslin. “Violence-related content in the nursing curriculum: A follow-up national survey.” *Journal of nursing education* 41, no. 8 (2002): 340-348; Elaine J. Alpert, Robert D. Sege, and Ylisabthy S. Bradshaw. “Interpersonal violence and the education of physicians.” *Academic Medicine* 72, no. 1 (1997): S41-S50.

53. Victor I. Vieth, Betsy Goulet, Michele Knox, Jennifer Parker, Lisa B. Johnson, Karla Steckler Tye, and Theodore P. Cross. “Child advocacy studies (CAST): A national movement to improve the undergraduate and graduate training of child protection professionals.” *Mitchell Hamline Law Review*. 45 (2019): 1129.

54. Aurea K. Osgood, “Lessons Learned from Students Surveys in a Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) Program.” *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 10, no. 3 (2017): 261-266; Jennifer, Parker, Lynn McMillan, Stacey Olson, Susan Ruppel, and Victor Vieth. “Responding to basic and complex cases of child abuse: A comparison study of recent and current child advocacy studies (CAST) students with DSS workers in the field.” *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 13, no. 4 (2020): 357-364; Michele Knox, Heather Pelletier, and Victor Vieth. “Educating medical students about adolescent maltreatment.” *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* 25, no. 3 (2013): 301-308; Michele S. Knox, Heather Pelletier, and Victor Vieth. “Effects of medical student training in child advocacy and child abuse prevention and intervention.” *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice, and policy* 6, no. 2 (2014): 129; Heather L. Pelletier and Michele Knox. “Incorporating child maltreatment training into medical school curricula.” *Journal of child & adolescent trauma* 10, no. 3 (2017): 267-274; Shipra Singh, Michele Knox, and Heather Pelletier. “Exploratory factor analysis and psychometric evaluation of the healthcare provider attitudes toward child maltreatment reporting scale.” *Children’s Health Care* 46, no. 4 (2017): 356-365.

55. Theodore P. Cross and Yu-Ling Chiu. “Evaluation of outcomes of Mississippi’s child advocacy studies training (CAST) initiative.” *Children and Youth Services Review* (2025): 108509; Theodore

A long-standing problem among all professions that service children and families is that undergraduate and graduate programs have provided limited and inadequate education in responding to child abuse—including DEI issues.

We also need to shift the training of MDTs from classroom learning to experiential training, which research has found to result in better decision making and more culturally competent delivery of services. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics encourages “simulation opportunities to ensure new pediatricians are competent to deliver culturally appropriate and patient- and family-centered care.”⁵⁶

Fifth, work with policy makers and other leaders in addressing systemic racism. It is well recognized that poverty is a significant contributor to child maltreatment and that people of color are more likely to be poor as a result of centuries of racist policies including slavery, segregation, redlining, and other cruelties. As noted by one literature review of our current child protection system: “efforts to address the notable racial disparity of [b]lack children referred to [Child Protective Services] should focus on the socio-economic antecedents that place [b]lack children at unequal risk of poverty.”⁵⁷

In addition to policies that lift families out of poverty, it is time for state legislatures, governors, and other policy leaders to end school corporal punishment. We know from research that school corporal punishment is harmful to children; we also know that children of color are disproportionately struck.⁵⁸

Sixth, the criminal justice system should be open to alternatives to conviction and incarceration in cases of child physical abuse

P. Cross and Y. Chiu. “Program Evaluation of Mississippi’s CAST Initiative.” (2021), https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20211119_ProgramEvaluationOfMississippisCASTInitiativeFinalReport.pdf; Theodore P. Cross and Yu-Ling Chiu. “Mississippi’s experience implementing a statewide child advocacy studies training (CAST) initiative.” *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development* 18, no. 4 (2021): 299-318.

56. Maria Trent, Danielle G. Dooley, Jacqueline Dougé, Robert M. Cavanaugh, Amy E. Lacroix, Jonathon Fanburg, Maria H. Rahmandar et al. “The impact of racism on child and adolescent health.” *Pediatrics* 144, no. 2 (2019).

57. Richard P. Barth, Jill Duerr Berrick, Antonio R. Garcia, Brett Drake, Melissa Jonson-Reid, John R. Gyourko, and Johanna KP Greeson. “Research to consider while effectively re-designing child welfare services.” *Research on Social Work Practice* 32, no. 5 (2022): 483-498.

58. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, & Sarah A. Font, “Corporal punishment in U.S. public schools: prevalence, disparities in use, and status in state and federal policy.” *Social Policy Report*, 30(1), (2016): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2016.tb00086.x>

involving corporal punishment that do not involve egregious harm. For example, the Dane County Attorney's Office in Madison, Wisconsin, has worked with diverse members of the community in designing and implementing a deferred prosecution program that requires parents to move away from physical discipline for cases of child physical abuse that do not involve egregious harm.⁵⁹ This is a promising practice that may not only reduce child physical abuse but also may reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system. We encourage other prosecutors to consider adopting similar initiatives.

Seventh, as child protection professionals respond to incidents of corporal punishment that are not unlawful in their jurisdictions, they should practice ethically and strive to respect people's rights. Out-of-home placement, supervised parenting time, therapeutic supervised visitation, urine screens, compulsory treatment, and monitoring are examples of formal interventions used by Child Protective Services. These interventions occur along a continuum of child welfare involvement that disproportionately involves and retains African American families, and "ages out" African American youth.⁶⁰ For caregivers who have not violated the law, this continuum and such interventions are inappropriate and potentially harmful.

It is critical to be guided by current law when responding to reports of child physical abuse and to respect the culture and rights of caregivers that have lawfully used physical discipline.⁶¹ Therefore, instead of the formal interventions noted above, the following are recommended on a voluntary basis: education on the risks of corporal punishment, referral to parenting classes, resources to learn alternative forms of discipline, parenting support groups, counseling, or similar services. These services, however, should be informally provided, voluntary, and attuned to the family's culture.⁶²

Faith communities can play a critical role in this effort. Indeed, the ELCA social message on child protection states "Synods and the churchwide organization are also encouraged to provide resources for parents and caregivers on effective forms of nonphysical discipline..."⁶³ Elsewhere, the social message on child protection also encourages public policies designed to strengthen families, reduce poverty, and support children in foster care including

It is well recognized that poverty is a significant contributor to child maltreatment and that people of color are more likely to be poor as a result of centuries of racist policies including slavery, segregation, redlining, and other cruelties.

those who are aging out of the system and in need of assistance.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it is an "experience of incomparable value" to "see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short from the perspective of those who suffer."⁶⁵ Corporal punishment is rooted in suffering—the suffering of the children who are hit and, in many instances, the suffering of parents who were hit as children and have been willfully and repeatedly subjected to cruelties for generations. Some of these cruelties continue and are at the center of this article, such as institutional racism, and social determinants of health, as well as failure to exercise cultural competence, respect for people's rights, and ethical professional practice.

Parents and other caregivers who have experienced intergenerational trauma may sincerely believe that physical discipline will effectively change behavior and promote the safety and success of their children. Those of us who have not been subjected to slavery, segregation, or systemic racism may learn of this history and come to possess an academic understanding of intergenerational trauma, but this is not the same as having a lived experience of bigotry and injustice or experiencing the weight of same in an under-resourced and high-stress parenting situation.

Those of us who have been part of a race or community that engaged in or benefitted from oppression must also inspect our souls and the souls of our ancestors. Are we the descendants of slaveowners or segregationists? Did our parents or grandparents believe that God relegated people of color to an inferior status?⁶⁶ Do we realize that most white Americans had an *unfavorable* response to the Freedom Rides and the March on Washington, and only 58% supported the Civil Rights Act?⁶⁷ Do we realize that even if our ancestors were on the right side of history in opposing

59. Kit R. Van Stelle and Janae Goodrich, *Racial Justice Improvement Project: Dane County Deferred Prosecution Child Abuse Initiative* (2015), <https://da.danecounty.gov/documents/pdf/DPCAIFinalReportJune2015.pdf>

60. Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity." Children's Bureau, United States Department of Health & Human Services (2021) <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/child-welfare-practice-address-racial-disproportionality-and-disparity/>

61. American Psychological Association (2024). *Guidelines for psychological evaluations in child protection matters*. <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/psychological-evaluations-child-protection-matters.pdf>

62. American Psychological Association (2024). *Guidelines for psychological evaluations*.

63. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 24,

64. ELCA, *Social Message on Child Protection*, 25-26.

65. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1953), 17.

66. See e.g., J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

67. Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On*, 255.

racism⁶⁸ that we nonetheless benefitted from an American economy built on the backs of slaves?⁶⁹

In bridging the divide over corporal punishment, as well as the divide over race and religion, a healthy dose of humility—and brutal honesty—is necessary. Through a shared humility, through candor that may at times be painful, and through a persistent

68. See e.g., Robert S. Graetz, *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press 1998); Kathryn M. Galchutt, *The Career of Andrew Schulze: Lutherans and Race in the Civil Rights Era: 1924-1968* (Macon, GE: Mercer University Press, 2005).

69. Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014).

Do we realize that even if our ancestors were on the right side of history in opposing racism that we nonetheless benefitted from an American economy built on the backs of slaves?

heartfelt extension of our hands, we may chart a path that leads to a better, safer place for all.

Appendix A. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Standards and Codes Governing MDT Members

Role	Association	Policy	DEI Domains in Standards and Code						
			Fair ^a	Humble ^b	Responsive ^c	Aware ^d	Applied ^e	Vocal ^f	Developing ^g
Mental Health	APA	EPPCC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Provider/ Examiner	AAMFT	COE	X	X	X			X	
	ASCA	ESSC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	APA	PME	X	X			X	X	
	AMHCA	COE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	ACA	COE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Social Workers	NASW	COE	X	X	X	X			
Nurses	CSWA	COE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Physician									
Judges	ANA	CEN	X	X	X	X	X		
Police	AMA	PME	X		X				
	ABA	MCJC	X	X					
	IACP	COE	X	X		X			
Prosecutors	ABA	CJSPF	X	X	X	X	X		
Defenders	ABA	CJSDF	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Forensic Interviewers	NACCFI	CEC	X		X	X			

Note. The ratings provided are based on our personal assessment of the standards and may reflect individual perspectives. Your own assessment of the standards may differ, but we hope our ratings will facilitate future revisions of these policies. Notably, other policies published by these associations may address additional dimensions. The associations and respective policies include the following: American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (EPPCC); American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT, 2015) Code of Ethics (COE); American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2022) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ESSC); American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) Principles of Medical Ethics (PME); American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA, 2020); American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014); National Association of Social Workers (2021); Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA, 2024); American Nurses Association (ANA, 2015) Code of Ethics for Nurses (CEN); American Medical Association (AMA, 2001) Principles of Medical Ethics (PME); American Bar Association (ABA, 2020) Model Code of Judicial Conduct (MCJC); International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2024); ABA (2017b) Criminal Justice Standards for

the Prosecution Function (CJSPF); ABA (2017a) Criminal Justice Standards for the Defense Function (CJSDF); National Association of Certified Child Forensic Interviewers (NACCFI, 2017) Code of Ethical Conduct (CEC).

^a Covers recommendations reflecting non-discrimination and fair treatment.

^b Applies when statements promoting self-reflection or cultural humility are present.

^c Covers recommendations for culturally responsive practice.

^d When the relevant section(s) call for understanding diversity or the operation of oppression within the lives of the MDT or family members.

^e Applies to statements recommending the encouragement of diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competence in the practices of MDT members' supervisees, trainees, and those developing policies concerning research, human resources, and other organizational issues.

^f Covers advocacy for equity, social justice, or antiracism.

^g Applies when the relevant sections encourage training, supervision, consultation, or continuing education in culturally informed practice.