

JUST WHO'S HURTING WHOM HERE?

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Now that I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations has expired and I'm reasonably safe from prosecution, I'm prepared to admit that I spanked my children. The operative word is spanked, mind you, not beat. Although not an every month occurrence, on occasion I found myself delivering a healthy smack on the bum where it would do a kid the most good.

The most serious physical punishment I ever dished out was delivering a couple of light—but stinging—strokes on the legs with a thin flexible switch. Reserved for only the most dangerous of infractions, Greg was twice on the receiving end of that punishment. The first time occurred when I awakened early one morning to find the front door open and our four-year-old missing. I did exactly what most mothers would do: PANIC! Just before calling on the National Guard and Boy Scouts for assistance, I thought to check a half-block down on the other side of the street where a family of four young boys lived. Greg was there and reacted the way he normally did when in trouble. He ran. But he couldn't outrun me and the switch I had prudently collected from a small tree.

The second switching incident also involved the busy street in front of our home. Mom was visiting when I saw Greg in the middle of the street with a truck bearing down on him. Wailing like a banshee, I ran into the street, scooped him up and headed for a tree. "You should explain to him why he shouldn't be in the street," said Mom, "not use a switch on him."

Her words might have had more effect on me had I not—from time to time while growing-up—been on the business end of a switch wielded by she who was pleading leniency for her grandson. "Hey, Mom," I said, "I'd rather switch him to keep him out of the street than see him run over by a truck."

Those of you who will admit to having tried it, know that it is not easy to inflict corporal punishment on a child you love. Still, the switching must have worked because, to this day, Greg has not been hit by a truck.

I once read an anecdote about a mother who sent her little girl out to a peach tree to break off a switch which the mother intended to employ to punish her daughter. When the little girl returned, she held out the object in her hand and said to her mother, "I couldn't weach the peach twee, but here's a wock you can frow at me." I don't know

what that mother did, but I am proud to report that I never threw a rock at either of my sons.

I guess, while I am confessing my parental transgressions, I should also admit to practicing mental cruelty on my children. Quite frankly, I was stunned when Greg recently told me his version of the following incident. Sure, I remember him getting into my purse and eating the seeds I had collected from a flowering tree at The Hermitage (President Andrew Jackson's home in Tennessee) in hope that they would sprout in Kansas soil. I even remember calling the Poison Control Center to make sure the seeds weren't toxic. What I don't remember is the conversation between Greg and me that he insists occurred at the conclusion of my consultation with the Poison Control Center. Here is that conversation, according to Greg:

Him: "Am I going to die?"

Me: "Well, we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

As for Ray, Jr. (aka Butch), our oldest son, it was hard to punish him more than he punished himself. When Butch committed those dangerous acts that would normally produce a punishment from me, he usually hurt himself so badly that a spanking on my part would be overkill. Take the time he was three and climbed a tree where neighborhood kids were building a treehouse. When Butch jumped from the tree, he landed on a nail which was sticking sharp-side up through a discarded board. Trust me on this: it is cruel and unusual punishment to require a mother to remove a nail that has punctured her child's foot after first going through the sole of his sneaker.

Often, before punishing me, my parents would say, "This is going to hurt me more than you." At the time, I thought they were nuts. Now, however, having been an administrator—as well as a recipient—of corporal punishment, I'm not so sure.