

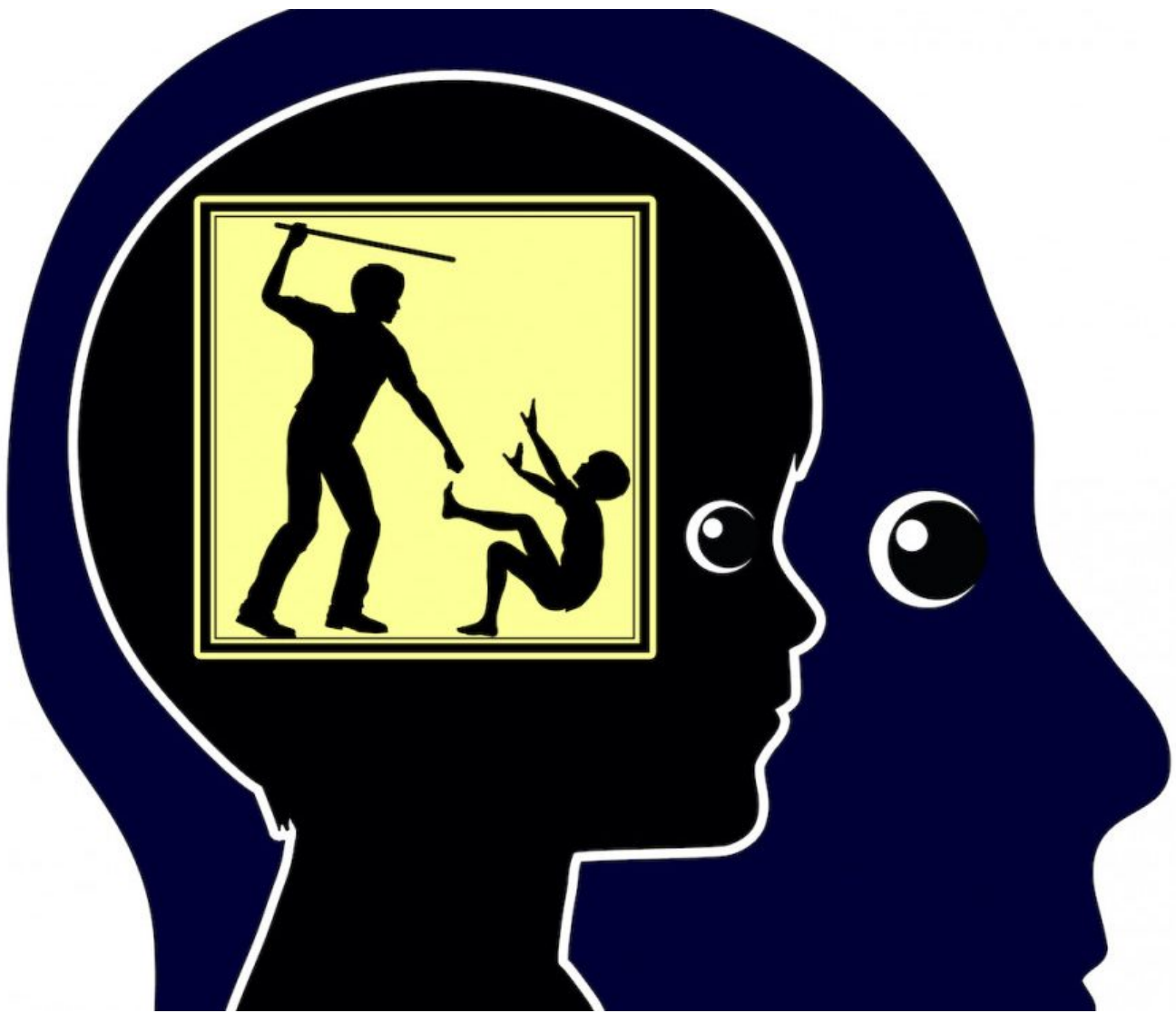
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November 18, 2016

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## **Spanking as a Cure for Mental Illness?**

*Last night, as I was having dinner with several dear friends and members of our Global Mental Health Program's International Advisory Board, the conversation found its way to the topic of mental illness. It is true that we do not have ready cures for everyone who presents with a mental health problem. But much to my dismay, I was told that [Steve Bannon, newly appointed chief strategist to our president-elect, claims to have the solution: "I've got a cure for mental health issue\[s\]. Spank your children more."](#)*



[Photo Credit](#)

*Could you imagine advocating spanking a child to cure her cancer? Or his learning disability? Whatever you think about spanking children, I can promise you, it is not the cure for mental illness. In fact, it is just the opposite.*

**1. Spanking doesn't even work as a disciplinary strategy.** The data are overwhelmingly consistent: not only does corporal punishment fail to get kids to do what parents want over the long haul, it can have disastrous psychological consequences for developing minds. [According to Elizabeth Gershoff, PhD - a psychologist who has led substantial research in this area - one of the greatest dangers of spanking is that because it doesn't work, parents keep escalating their harsh punishment in desperation, but to no avail,](#) creating a vicious cycle of trauma.

**2. Spanking: short-term vs. long-term effects.** [The American Psychological Association Task Force on Physical Punishment of Children](#) reports that physical punishment may indeed have the effect of halting problematic behavior in the moment, because children are

afraid of being hit or injured. However, in the long-term, spanking doesn't have any positive benefit and often leads to a sustained pattern of defiance and aggression in children.

**3. Spanking is correlated with anti-social behavior and mental health problems.** [Five decades of research that includes over 160,000 children clearly indicates that more spanking means more anti-social behavior and increased rates of mental health problems.](#) And we should be clear here: the authors focused on spanking, which they defined as an open-handed hit on the behind or extremities. Perhaps most disconcerting is finding that spanking can get so serious that it starts look like physical abuse and its consequences.

**4. Spanking is a form of “legalized violence against children” according to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.** [This UN Committee advocates for the elimination of corporal punishment of children in all settings through “legislative, administrative, social and educational measures.”](#) This treaty has been supported by 192 countries, with only the United States and Somalia failing to ratify it.

**5. Spanking as a cure for mental illness has no support.** Nowhere. Nada. Niente. None.

*Parenting is joyful, meaningful and wonderful. It can also be challenging. Any honest parent can recount moments of exasperation and impatience in the course of childrearing. And these moments are likely to be even more frequent when parenting kids with mental health problems. However, spanking is not a solution but rather a symptom. Spanking will not cure mental health problems but instead will exacerbate and potentially increase risk for mental health problems. The scientific community is steadily bringing to light the causes of mental illness and treatments that work. Let us not stumble in the darkness of ignorance by tolerating unfounded and stigmatizing views about mental illness. We have worked too hard to get to where we are today.*

*There are only 17 workdays left in the 114th Congress. Bills introduced in the House and Senate to strengthen coordination of mental health resources, improve parity, increase access and integrate care are waiting for a vote.*

*Forget about spanking and instead tell Congress to pass mental health reform legislation now.*