

Beyond the Rod: A Salesian Approach to Corporal Punishment

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Abstract

Contemporary debates concerning corporal punishment in child-rearing often appeal to an overly literal interpretation of Old Testament wisdom texts—especially Proverbs 13:24, 23:13–14, and Sirach 30:1–13—as divine authorization for physical discipline. Such readings generate tension between biblical data and contemporary neuropsychological findings, which increasingly demonstrate the harmful effects of corporal punishment in child development. In light of a Catholic understanding of faith and reason and a deeper appreciation of the dignity of the human person, this article seeks to reconcile this tension by allowing neuropsychology and New Testament teachings on child-rearing to inform the application of these Old Testament passages. In doing so, this article argues that the perceived tension arises largely from an insufficiently nuanced hermeneutic that neglects literary genre, canonical context, and moral development within Scripture. After presenting the traditional interpretation of these passages, including their reception in Saint Thomas Aquinas’s moral theology, the study proposes a new methodology that draws upon the pedagogical wisdom of Saint John Bosco’s preventive system and contemporary research on child development. Through a canonical, redemptive-historical, and spiritually informed hermeneutic, the article aims at articulating a Catholic framework that reexamines the wisdom literature’s use of disciplinary images within the broader biblical narrative. This multidisciplinary approach will demonstrate that a nuanced understanding of the biblical data, child development, and the inherent dignity of the human person demonstrates that nonviolent, conscience-forming approaches to discipline are not only consistent with Catholic and biblical values, but also most conducive to the holistic flourishing of children in today’s world.

Keywords: child-rearing, corporal punishment, hermeneutics, Saint John Bosco, Saint Thomas Aquinas

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Few topics stir as much ethical and theological debates as the role of corporal punishment in the realm of discipline and child-rearing. The word “corporal” refers to bodily injury, and “punishment” is here defined as the imposition of a penalty, in this case physical, for an offense or fault (Society for Adolescent Medicine 2002–2003 Ad Hoc Corporal Punishment Committee, 2003, p. 385). The debate is not only personal—for spanking is often passed down through generations as an unquestioned form of punishment—but also deeply interpretive, as it involves diverging readings of its ethical foundation and effects. For Christians, Scripture carries significant implications in this thorny issue. In fact, many advocates of corporal punishment turn to passages in the Old Testament to justify the practice, invoking a reading of the text that seemingly enshrines physical discipline as divinely sanctioned. For some, these readings triumph over any scientific discoveries on the effects of corporal punishment on children, creating a perceived dichotomy between faith and reason.

In response to this tension, this article seeks to bridge the apparent divide by exploring an alternative Catholic framework that harmonizes the biblical text, with special focus on Proverbs 13:24, 23:13–14 and Sirach 30:1–13, with psychological and theological insights. By reexamining these passages with an alternative methodology—drawing on modern neuropsychological studies and exemplified by the wisdom of Saint John Bosco—this article seeks to propose a liberation from a literalist reading of passages in the Old Testament on corporal punishment, showing the unity of faith and reason in navigating the challenges of parenthood. Through this neuropsychologically informed biblical analysis, this article will seek to demonstrate that a nuanced understanding of the biblical data, scientific insights on the effects of corporal punishment, and the inherent dignity of the human person support the notion that

gentle parenting is not only consistent with Catholic values but also most conducive to the holistic well-being and flourishing of children in today's world.

The Traditional Readings

Although it would be beyond the scope of this article to navigate the full exegetical intricacies of all three passages, this section will present the clear traditional readings of Proverbs 13:24, 23:13–14, and Sirach 30:1–13. A brief commentary of the Church's traditional interpretation of these passages will be presented at the end of the section.

Proverbs 13:24

Proverbs 13:24 reads: “He who spares the rod hates his child, but he who loves him is diligent in discipline of him” (Proverbs 13:24).¹ This passage has a few peculiar points of reflection. First, the word שָׂנֵא (śōnē) “hate” in the verse is both a participle and a stative verb. However, most stative verbs by nature cannot have participle forms. One of the few exceptions is the verb שָׂנֵא (śānē) (“to hate”) in contexts where the verb takes on a dynamic overtone, making the nuance on the action itself to be the rod-spearer “is hating” his son (male possessive) (Brown et al., 1906/1977, p. 971). The author of this passage is thus using the hate–love relationship to stress the difference between “discipline” and “sparing the rod,” pointing out how the failure to discipline a child is tantamount to hating him. Fox comments, “Here is a paradox: a harshness prompted by love, a lenience motivated by hatred. Though the lax father does not really hate his son, his laxity will have disastrous consequences (19:18b) and is thus tantamount to hatred” (Fox, 2009, pp. 570–571). The interpretation of the passage hinges on the word שָׂנֵא

¹ All Bible translations in this article are my own and based on the *Lexham Hebrew Bible* (Lexham Press, 2012) and the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.; Nestle et al., 2012) unless otherwise indicated.

(*šibṭô*) (literally “his rod”), emphasizing that the symbol used for discipline is not a flexible switch but a rigid staff, *שֵׁבֶט* (*šēbet*), often depicted as a weapon, as in 2 Samuel 23:21.

The second half of the verse sees God’s pedagogic motive for parents to love their children as much as they discipline them (Shupak, 1984/1985; Waltke, 2004).² In fact, the verb *שָׁחַר* (*šāḥar*) (literally “seeks him”) is translated “is diligent” because it points to this being done early in the child’s life as way to prompt discipline. For the Hebrew expression used to “seek” the child with the rod implies a daily or diligent discipline in relation to the daily or diligent love that the father shows to the child. This is seen in the way the verse ends, for in “discipline him,” *מוֹסֵר* (*mūsār*), functions as an adverbial accusative of reference, as the diligence is in reference to discipline.³

Ultimately, this verse has been traditionally understood as a reminder of the balance between love and discipline in parenting. The “rod” has been consistently interpreted to signify corporal punishment.⁴ The language of “hate” and “love” functions as a rhetorical device, contrasting the consequences of neglecting discipline with the benefits of a loving, structured approach. This traditional interpretation emphasizes that true parental love requires diligence in discipline and such discipline aims at removing the folly that is bound up in the heart of the child (Proverbs 22:15; cf. Genesis 8:21), which is aimed at nurturing the child’s virtue rather than

² Here is the reason why many translations add the word “diligently” or “often,” for the verb does not contain it outside of commending bodily chastisement as a means of training in and of itself, but the hints of such meaning (hence the translation) are seen by looking at the verse as a whole (see Toy, 1899, p. 278).

³ As Shupak notes, “the Hebrew noun *mūsār* and the verb *yāsar*, like [their Egyptian equivalents], have the double meaning of ‘instruct-reprove’ and ‘chastise-beat’” (Shupak, 1984/1985, p. 107).

⁴ The literal interpretation of the rod has been defended historically, emphasizing the cultural context in which corporal punishment was often seen as essential to instilling wisdom and obedience in children.

imposing control or harm. By “seeking” the child with this disciplined love, parents are believed to reflect God’s own approach to His people: one of guidance that is both firm and compassionate.

Proverbs 23:13–14

Proverbs 23:13–14 reads: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; even if you strike him with the rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will deliver him from death” (Proverbs 23:13–14). Verse 13 starts with a strong, urgent, personalized prohibition, characterized by the *al*-second-person jussive verb, “you shall not/do not withhold,” אַל-תִּמְנַע (*al-timna*), which is contrasted with the second part of the verse characterized by the *lo*-third-person imperfect verb, “he will not die,” לֹא יָמוּת (*lō’ yāmût*), which expresses legislation. The verse is centered around the parent’s desire to preserve the life of the child and how discipline, further explained by the striking of the child with the rod, will not kill the child but rather save him. For as seen in verse 14, the undisciplined life would amount to an early death. In fact, the conditional sentence in verse 14 (if you “strike” or “punish”) builds on the concept of discipline in verse 13, the same way that “he will not die” is echoed in verse 14’s “you will deliver his soul from Sheol.”⁵

The term “discipline” is further explained by the concept of “striking” with a rod. As Waltke comments on the verse, “You strike him (see 17:10) with the rod (see 10:13) refers to a severe, but not fatal, flogging to cleanse the youth and to prevent the repetition of his folly (cf. 17:10, 26; 19:25; 20:30)” (Waltke, 2004, p. 244). Waltke further clarifies that the phrase “he will

⁵ The Hebrew word for “soul” here, נֶפֶשׁ (*nepes̄*), is often translated as “him” (in reference to the child in the verse). I translated it with the personal pronoun due to the synecdochal function of the part (soul) referring to the whole (person); this is common in Hebrew poetry and ornate discourse (Brown et al., 1906/1977, p. 660).

not die” in Proverbs 23:14b means that “because of” the flogging the youth will not die, rather than suggesting that “from” the flogging he will not die (i.e., he will survive the act itself).

Furthermore, the parallel in 14b indicates that “death” here likely signifies an eternal separation from the fullness of life found in relationship with God rather than mere clinical death (see Proverbs 5:23; 10:21; 15:10; 19:16, 18). Thus, while clinical death may come, the grave (literally “Sheol”) will not hold him (the child) eternally (Waltke, 2004, p. 244).⁶ According to the traditional reading, severe discipline implies corporal punishment and, therefore, is not cruel; withholding it from a hardened youth is.

Sirach 30:1–13

Sirach 30:1–13 reads:

1 A father who loves his son will chastise him often, so that he can be proud of him later.
 2 If a son is disciplined, he will be of some use, and his father can boast of him to his friends.
 3 Anyone who gives good guidance to his son cannot only take pride in him among his friends, but he can make his enemies jealous.
 4–5 While the father is alive, the sight of his son makes him happy, and when he dies, he has no regrets. He is not really dead, because his son is like him.
 6 He has left someone to take vengeance on his enemies and to return the favors he owes his friends.
 7 But anyone who spoils his son will have to bandage his wounds. His heart will stop every time he hears a shout.
 8 An untamed horse is going to be stubborn, and an undisciplined son is no different.
 9 If you pamper your child and play with him, he will be a disappointment and a source of grief.

⁶ The concept of death here is that discipline guides a child toward a full life; without it, an untimely death would likely be the result of a lack of proper training through discipline (i.e., the striking of the rod).

10 Laugh with him now, and one day you will have to cry over him, grinding your teeth in regret. 11 Don't give him freedom while he is young, and don't overlook what he does wrong. 12 Whip him while he is still a child, and make him respect your authority. If you don't, he will be stubborn and disobedient and cause you nothing but sorrow. 13 So discipline your son and give him work to do, or else he will be an embarrassment to you. (Sirach 30:1–13)

This passage has two contrasting scenarios for the same father–son relationship, which offer two different potential outcomes of disciplined versus undisciplined parenting. Ben Sira emphasizes that the father has a key role in shaping the child's character and future outcomes. This pericope can be divided into part one (verse 1–6) and part two (verses 7–13).⁷ Parts one and two are clearly contrasted by the words chosen, such as “love” in verse 1 and “spoil” in verse 7. Although verse 1 translates “a father who loves his son chastises him often,” the Greek manuscripts would be rendered “will continue the whips with him,” showing how the chastisement implies constant and heavy corporal punishment. This contrast between part one and part two highlights how the “constant whipping/chastisement” is an act of love intended to build up the son's character so that in the future the father can “be proud of him” (verse 2).

In the Greek, ἐνδεδεχθήσει (*endelechēsei*) is here used exceptionally in a transitive sense and with αὐτοῦ (*autou*) referring to child (literally “son”), the verse limits ἐσχάτων (*eschatōn*) to refer to the father rejoicing over his son's later life (Lange et al., 1885/2008, p. 358). The father's reputation among friends and even enemies will reflect the son's careful upbringing (verses 2–3). The son's obedience and discipline bring honor not only to himself but also to his father,

⁷ The division is warranted by the two poems present in the text, respectively verses 1–6 and verses 7–13.

indicating that parental discipline has broader social implications in terms of respect and legacy.⁸ Proper discipline leads to rejoicing, allowing the father to die in peace with the assurance that the son would go and follow the father's steps. Here the disciplined son is seen as the father's legacy (verses 4–6), not just a biological heir but a representative of the father's own character, who would continue the father's business as presented in the “take vengeance on his enemies and return favors to his friends” (verse 6). The dutiful son would go on as the father had begun (Lange et al., 1885/2008, p. 358).⁹

However, the danger of permissive parenting is presented with verse 7, likening the undisciplined child to an “untamed horse” that will eventually harm itself and others.¹⁰ The motif in this second part is highlighted by the father's desire to avoid embarrassment and sorrow. One can find an interlinear parallelism in verse 9, which says that “if you *pamper* your child and *play* with him” this is to indulge him with the result that “he will be a *disappointment* and a *source of*

⁸ This harkens back to the precepts in Deuteronomy. In the Law of Moses, there were penalties for a child who is unruly and disobedient. In fact, if a child was rebellious and would not obey his father and not heed his parents when disciplined then the parents would need to take the child to the elders of the town at the gate. The elders would pronounce judgment on the child (literally “son,” the same word used in the Proverbs passages previously mentioned) and stone him to death so as to “purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear” (Deuteronomy 21:18–21).

⁹ In Tobit 9:6, when Gabael finds Tobias, it states:

With tears in his eyes Gabael returned the greeting and added, “You are just like your honest and generous father. May the Lord in heaven bless you and your wife, your mother-in-law, and your father. Praise God! He has let me live to see my cousin Tobias, who looks so much like his father.” (Tobit 9:6)

Since there was no constant belief in a blessed immortality at that time, children gave parents a sense of “continuity;” hence it was important to train children to be upright, wise, and pious.

¹⁰ This might be difficult to the modern reader, but the text connects the child's discipline to the discipline of animals. Just as an untamed animal becomes stubborn and wild, a child without boundaries grows resistant to authority, which results in sorrow for the parent.

grief" (emphasis added). The parent foolish enough to share in his child's frivolity will share in his sorrow and grit his teeth in regret (verse 10). This is evident elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹

The passage's imagery becomes increasingly vivid, with verses 12 and 13 emphasizing the need to establish respect and authority early in the child's life. Di Lella (1987) states:

Giving a son "his own way in his youth" (30:11a) is a sure way for a father to spoil him.

A son's "follies" (30:11b) indicate a "lack of discipline" (30:12a), in which case a father should "belabor" or "beat" his son's "ribs" (30:12a) and "smite his flanks" (30:12b).

Otherwise, the boy will become "stubborn" and "disobey" his father (30:12c) and bring on his "last breath" (30:12d). (Dilella, 1987, p. 377)

In other words, Ben Sira concludes that giving freedom to the child will bring sorrow to the father, echoing the shame that the mother would have in Proverbs 29:15 if discipline does not include the rod. In this section, Ben Sira encourages no weak indulgence but to be harsh in treatment; this is the role of parenthood. The text continues by urging a father to discipline his son by making "heavy his yoke" (verse 13a),¹² with self-interested motivations (verses 12b–13). Overall, the passage's traditional understanding is rooted in the shared Old Testament parental vision as presented in ancient cultures where a father's honor and the child's moral integrity were deeply interconnected.

¹¹ See, for instance, Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2.

¹² Some would look at Sirach 30 and discredit its canonicity due to the harsh language present. Lange et al. (1885/2008) state:

One might suppose the advice here given was for the treatment of slaves rather than children, and it would even then be harsh. The underlying idea is undoubtedly good, and needful in our day, as well as in that of the author of our book. But, in detail, it would be a very unsafe principle to follow. The spirit that rules in the inspired books of the Bible is quite another one. (p. 358)

However, this is far from the truth, as the phrase in verse 13 derives from 1 Kings. 12:10–11, showing the consistency of Sirach's harsh corporal punishment with the protocanonical texts.

Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Traditional Commentary

The interpretation of these passages finds support in the tradition.¹³ Although it is beyond the scope of this article to navigate the tradition's comments on child-rearing, key figures such as Saint Thomas Aquinas offer insights that reinforce the traditional understanding of these proverbs on discipline and child-rearing. Within the *Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae*, Aquinas comments on deeds that would cause injury to a neighbor against his will. In commenting on the use of physical force, he structures Question 64 on murder, Question 65 on deeds that cause bodily injury, and Question 66 on theft and robbery. In the section on bodily injury, Article 2 of Question 65 engages with the lawfulness for parents to strike their children, building the ethical response on the traditional reading of these Old Testament texts. This article from Saint Thomas provides a theological and philosophical framework that further exemplifies the traditional understanding and ethical application of corporal punishment in child-rearing.

In Saint Thomas's examination, authority figures—whether parents, masters, or civil rulers—possess a divinely ordained right to impose discipline, including physical correction, provided it is administered for the correction and benefit of the individual. As Brian Davies comments on the passage, for Aquinas “it is not unjust for parents to use corporal punishment if their intention is to train their children” (Davies, 2014, p. 254). This aligns with Proverbs and Sirach, which seem to advocate corporal punishment as an act aimed at correcting folly and securing the child's future virtue. In looking at the Doctor's text, Aquinas's justification for such a corporal act of coercion rests on two primary principles.

¹³ See, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Augustine, to name a few. For discussion, see (Voicu, 2019, pp. 764–765; John Chrysostom, ca. 390/2006, p. 133; Augustine, 1897/1994, pp. 641–642). There seems to be a consistent support for the traditional understanding of corporal punishment among the Church Fathers.

First, coercion is deemed legitimate when exercised by those with lawful authority, such as parents or masters who act as stewards over their dependents. Saint Thomas defends the lawfulness of striking a child for correction, whether the child is willing or unwilling to be hit (Aquinas, 1265–1274/1920, II–II, Q. 65, Art. 2).¹⁴ Saint Thomas insists that such authority is granted by divine law, which entrusts parents with moral formation and governance of the home (Aquinas, 1265–1274/1920, I–II, Q. 105, Art. 4, resp.). He states, “since the child is subject to the power of the parent, and the slave to the power of his master, a parent can lawfully strike his child, and a master his slave that instruction may be enforced by correction” (Aquinas, 1265–1274/1920, II–II, Q. 65, Art. 2, resp.). Second, coercion is deemed legitimate when it serves a corrective purpose. If correction aims at reforming the individual and that individual is under the “jurisdiction” of the agent of correction, then the corrective purpose justifies corporal punishment as it prevents harm to the person and the common good. This second justification finds an analog in the passages from Proverbs and Sirach, which portray corporal punishment as both necessary and benevolent.

Aquinas’s understanding of corporal punishment is defended from these wisdom texts, extending the rationale for coercion to even the treatment of slaves. He explicitly condones corporal punishment in cases where a slave’s actions undermine the master’s authority or disrupt household order. For Aquinas, the slave master’s duty is analogous to the parent’s: to guide those under their “jurisdiction” toward the good, even through the use of coercive physical force if

¹⁴ “It is lawful for anyone to impart correction to a willing subject. But to impart it to an unwilling subject belongs to those only who have charge over him. To this pertains chastisement by blows” (Aquinas, 1265–1274/1920, p. 217). For Aquinas, the child, as well as the slave, falls under the lawful correction of unwilling subjects because the one doing the correction is their direct authority (parents and slave owners).

necessary. This reading harmonizes with Sirach's metaphor of the undisciplined child as an "untamed horse" (30:8) and reflects the broader traditional assumptions of his time where physical correction was considered an essential component of parental governance.

Questions Left Unanswered

While Aquinas's arguments align with the traditional interpretation of these biblical texts and is informed by the New Testament precepts, they raise significant ethical concerns (Aquinas, 1265–1274/2012, II-II, Q. 65, Art. 2, ad 1).¹⁵ By grounding the legitimacy of coercion in authority and corrective intent, Aquinas effectively sanctifies hierarchical relationships that may perpetuate harm under the guise of discipline. His categorization of children and slaves as requiring external governance reinforces a paternalistic worldview that privileges the coercer's perspective over the autonomy and dignity of the coerced.

Moreover, Aquinas's reliance on the virtue of justice as a justification for physical punishment appears paradoxical. While he insists that such lawful acts must be motivated by love, the practical application often blurs the line between correction and domination. This tension is evident in his defense of corporal punishment as both a demonstration of the order of justice and a means of rectifying the will of the subordinate. However, Aquinas's reasoning risks conflating justice with the authority's imposition of order, overlooking the potential for abuse of this power in the hands of those tasked with discipline. By asserting that justice can be met with physical correction, Aquinas's view leans heavily on an idealized perception of authority wherein the ethicality of an action is tied to the presumed intention and lawfulness of the one in

¹⁵ Saint Thomas echoes Ephesians 6:4 in this passage. The tension between the New Testament passages on child-rearing and the wisdom literature that Aquinas quoted is implicitly acknowledged but left unresolved.

power rather than to the respect for the inherent dignity, autonomy, and moral consciousness of the one being corrected.

Overall, the traditional understanding of corporal punishment as a method of discipline, defended in Proverbs and Sirach and restated by major theologians of the Church, has been rooted in the belief that corporal punishment accomplishes what it morally and spiritually aims to do: the correction of wrongdoing, the formation of virtue, and the maintenance of societal order. However, the New Testament and the neuropsychological data, exemplified by the wisdom of Saint John Bosco with his Salesian approach to corporal punishment, demand a reevaluation of these passages and the theology that they have formed. If Aquinas's framework invites scrutiny, then this article will explore and present an alternative position to these Old Testament passages that is informed by the New Testament's insights on child-rearing and a neuropsychologically informed hermeneutic on the harms of corporal punishment. To this we now turn.

Discipline and Development: Empirical Insights

To reinterpret these passages effectively, a clear methodology must first be established. This section will thus present modern neuropsychological studies on the negative effects of corporal punishment, providing scientific grounding for a compassionate and developmental approach to education and child-rearing. By grounding our new methodology in empirical insights about children's emotional and cognitive development, we can articulate a pedagogical framework for interpreting biblical texts on discipline in a way that promotes moral formation, relational flourishing, and human dignity. In doing so, this framework both aligns with contemporary findings and remains deeply rooted in the Catholic moral tradition.

The Neuropsychological Insights

This renewed approach to a more consonant understanding of child-rearing would be incomplete without integrating the contemporary scientific consensus on the harms of corporal punishment. In this article, neuropsychological insights form a central component of the proposed methodology and undergird the larger theological argument. If the latest studies on the effects of corporal punishment are true, then one needs to reckon with the scientific data in order to have an informed view of child-rearing and the effects of corporal punishment on children (Tomoda et al., 2009). The latest studies in the realm of neuropsychology and child development have shown a clear difference between children who were spanked and those who were not. The latest advances in psychology and neurodevelopmental research have shed significant light on the detrimental effects of corporal punishment on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

One key finding in the research on corporal punishment is that it can interfere with the development of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation. When children are repeatedly subjected to physical punishment, the stress response system can become dysregulated, leading to difficulties in managing stress and frustration later in life. This is especially problematic during the early years of development when the brain is most plastic and sensitive to environmental influences. A study completed in 2021 has shown the link between spanking and detrimental child outcomes. In the study, children who were spanked were tested to see if they exhibited altered neural function in response to stimuli that suggested the presence of possible threats through the analysis of the activation of medial and lateral prefrontal cortex (Cuartas et al., 2021, p. 822). Through fMRI analysis, the data showed that children who were subjected to corporal punishment had altered neural

responses similar to those of children who experienced more severe forms of maltreatment (Cuartas et al., 2021, pp. 828–829).

Moreover, the negative effects point to the failure to enhance moral character development through corporal punishment. The Society for Adolescent Medicine has shown how ineffective this method is for improving children's proper behavior (Moelis, 1988). These studies have consistently shown that children who are subjected to corporal punishment are more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes compared to those who are not. Outside the ones previously referenced, other studies have shown that children who were spanked had increased aggression, anxiety, depression, and a higher likelihood of developing antisocial behaviors (Gershoff, 2002; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Furthermore, these children may have more difficulty regulating their emotions and may struggle with building positive, trusting relationships with others (Straus & Donnelly, 1993; Straus et al., 2013, p. 45).

Moreover, studies have found that children who experience corporal punishment often internalize a model of authority based on fear and coercion. This can affect their relationships with parents, teachers, and peers, and can contribute to a cycle of aggression and conflict in later life. The long-term consequences of corporal punishment can be particularly harmful to the emotional development of children, leading them to feel less secure in their relationships and more likely to engage in hostile or violent behavior themselves.

While the data does not suggest that corporal punishment causes all children to necessarily develop these issues, the correlations between physical discipline and negative developmental outcomes are significant and universal enough to call into question the efficacy and moral validity of using corporal punishment as a disciplinary method. In contrast, nonviolent forms of discipline consistently correlate with healthier emotional development, improved

behavioral regulation, and more secure parent–child attachment. These empirical insights provide an indispensable foundation for any contemporary reassessment of biblical texts concerning discipline. Having established the scientific basis for a nonviolent paradigm, we now turn to the methodological principles that will guide the integration of these findings into a coherent and renewed theological approach. To this, we now turn.

A New Proposal

Methodology

If the neuropsychological findings are true, then they need to be reckoned with as one seeks a holistic approach to child-rearing that is founded on truth—truth that encompasses both faith and reason. The wisdom of Scripture and the Church’s teachings, including those on child discipline, must not be seen in isolation from the insights that modern science offers us. The Catholic intellectual tradition holds that faith and reason are complementary, not contradictory. Thus, when neuropsychological studies demonstrate the harmful effects of corporal punishment on children’s development and overall well-being, it is not a matter of dismissing the biblical or theological understanding of child-rearing but rather integrating these new insights into a more complete understanding of how to raise children in a manner that is both morally sound and psychologically beneficial.

Theological insights and scientific understanding, properly understood, cannot be in conflict because they both seek to uncover and align with objective truth. A genuinely Catholic pedagogy must therefore be informed not only by the moral demands of the gospel but also by what contemporary research reveals about child development. This holistic system must then be rooted in an integral understanding of the human person and how to form children morally and intellectually, letting scientific data guide our practices today. The latest neuropsychological

research shows that children thrive best in environments where discipline is characterized by love, consistency, and respect, rather than fear of physical punishment. This aligns with the New Testament's insights on how Christians are called to treat others, especially children, with the dignity and respect due to them as persons made in the image of God.¹⁶

Therefore, if one accepts the premise that reason—illuminated by scientific insight—helps us understand the best way to raise children, it stands to reason that such understanding must inform our interpretation of Scripture.¹⁷ The passages in Proverbs and Sirach that seem to endorse corporal punishment must be viewed within the broader context of the human person's development and the goal of child-rearing, which is not merely compliance or obedience but the proper formation of the conscience directed toward virtue, with sainthood as its final end. In light of the neuropsychological research on the negative effects of corporal punishment, one must ask whether traditional interpretations of certain biblical passages still stand, or whether a more compassionate and psychologically informed approach is required for the flourishing of children and human dignity as a whole.

In this way, the relation of faith and reason leads not to a watering down of biblical teaching but to a richer, fuller application of it—one that respects the dignity of the child, fosters a holistic relation between parent and child, and promotes a healthy and flourishing development of child-rearing that accords with both biblical principles and scientific data. By adopting a methodology that embraces both the timeless wisdom of Proverbs and Sirach and the

¹⁶ Since the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has shown greater sensitivity and awareness on the topic of human dignity. Although it would be outside the scope of this article, one could connect the seminal insights on freedom from coercion and violence in *Dignitatis Humanae* to the ethical validity of corporal punishment in light of the arguments presented.

¹⁷ If not, one is left with a fideistic approach to Scripture, which is not Catholic nor reasonable to uphold (Catholic Church, 1870/1871, ch. 4; Catholic Church, 1994, para. 159).

contemporary insights of science, one can better discern and live out a form of discipline that honors the dignity of the child and fosters their God-given purpose. This holistic approach is thus the path forward for a truly humane, loving, and effective way of guiding children to maturity.

The Reexamination of the Biblical Data

In light of the methodology presented, one can then reapproach the text in Proverbs and Sirach and see the spiritual significance of the passage, interpreting particular symbols and practices in light of literary and rhetorical analysis. In fact, one cannot do justice to the exegesis of the text if such interpretation is done in a vacuum. The traditional reading of these passages has taken into consideration the literary context of the texts and their genre as Jewish wisdom literature, but often lacked the redemptive-movement approach that carries the interpretation forward to the moral sense of the texts and their proper application, thereby failing to discern contemporary expressions that truly carry their exegetical significance and fulfill the original ethical intent of these wisdom texts. In light of the broader deposit of faith, one can find an ethical development demanding a more robust exegesis of these passages on child-rearing.¹⁸

If one looks at the canonical context—that which yields a sense of the underlying spirit of the biblical text—one can see a development of the ethical portrait of God’s desire for humanity, where the character of God is progressively revealed as one of compassion, mercy, and love, and the ideal of human behavior is correspondingly refined to emphasize justice, kindness, and

¹⁸ This is a consistent hermeneutical approach that gives justice to the Old Testament text considering the pericope, its context, and the fuller revelation of God’s plan in the person and work of Jesus Christ. A redemptive-movement hermeneutic, which approaches Scripture by tracing the trajectory of God’s moral and redemptive purposes throughout the biblical narrative, is thus needed to do justice to the biblical text. Without it, one will unwittingly substitute eisegesis for exegesis, mistakenly regarding the simplistic reading of the text as the obvious reading of the same. Such lack of nuance fails to recognize the progressive nature of God’s revelation and the ethical intent of the text (cf. Webb, 2011).

humility.¹⁹ This canonical context, in turn, provides a framework for interpreting individual passages and pericopes, guiding the reader toward a deeper understanding of the biblical message and its enduring relevance for human life and flourishing.

This is already done partially by the traditional reading of these Old Testament passages on child-rearing, for multiple commentators have moved beyond the concrete-specific teaching on corporal punishment, which is clearly too harsh if taken in a literalistic sense, and embraced a greater fulfillment of the canonical context in light of the New Testament teachings. This traditional reading is yet incomplete, as it needs to fully recognize that Old Testament instructions do not always represent an ultimate ethic in their treatment of human beings.²⁰

Therefore, an allegorical sense and moral sense of the wisdom texts warrant an abstraction from the concrete-specific text to the spiritual sense of the text, which is often required for wisdom texts. In other words, one cannot invoke the “sanctity” of any corporal punishment scenario, slavery, or mutilation in the Bible simply because they are present in the text. If one is consistently abstracting the teachings on slavery and mutilation in the biblical texts, then one ought to do the same with other corporal punishments. From the seemingly punitive discipline in Proverbs 13 and 23, and Sirach 30, one can abstract the teachings to a constructive discipline that is a restorative, rather than a destructive, pedagogy. Hence, these Old Testament readings need an abstraction that moves past corporal punishment toward the

¹⁹ This is most perfectly brought to full display by the Incarnation and work of the Son of God as testified in the New Testament.

²⁰ To think this would be a grave and misguided assumption, for one can find clear teachings on slavery in the Old Testament and yet the Church, through a canonical and redemptive hermeneutic, has definitively declared slavery to be impermissible and intrinsically evil, an affront to the dignity of the human person. This, however, took time to evolve (Catholic Church, 1965b, para. 27; John Paul II, 1993, para. 80; Catholic Church, 1994, para. 2414; Fiedler & Rabben, 1998).

eschatological hope and redemption that the canonical context echoes throughout the biblical text.

This abstraction can be seen in Sirach 30:1–13, where the sacred author juxtaposes sound discipline with the lack of discipline. The wisdom of Ben Sira ultimately states that if one does not discipline their children, the lack of discipline will lead their children to overindulgence. If discipline corresponds to anything, the emphasis is on establishing a disciplined character through steady guidance rather than excessive harshness.

Sirach 30:1–13 is meant to be a warning to parents to be good stewards of their role as educators, showing how a child who is raised properly will bring in return great joy to the parent who labored to raise their child in virtue and fear of the Lord. Rather than advocating for mere corporal punishment, the text focuses on the importance of discipline and authoritative parenting—seeking attuned interaction with children without removing a structured order that ensures reason-led and compassionate discipline for the sake of growth and emotional maturity.

In the text of Proverbs, the use of a rod can be understood in reference to training by word (e.g., Proverbs 15:5) or by deed (e.g., Proverbs 23:13). Here, the “sparing of the rod” implies permissiveness, contrasted with the diligent and loving correction that is necessary for a child’s moral and spiritual formation (cf. Proverbs 22:15; Ephesians 6:4). In this sense, the “rod” is abstracted to refer to a wise and loving discipline rather than physical punishment. The wisdom text thus highlights the importance of discipline and guidance, and how consistent parental formation is intentional and aims at the pursuit of virtue and wisdom. This echoes the context and purpose of the book of Proverbs as a whole, which aims to impart wisdom, prudence, and virtue to the young and the simple (cf. Proverbs 1:2–7) that they may live a life of integrity, justice, and righteousness.

In sum, the reexamination of these wisdom texts—guided by a renewed methodology attentive to both tradition and contemporary neuropsychological insights—reveals a trajectory away from literalist readings of corporal punishment and toward a vision of discipline ordered to restoration, virtue, and relational formation. Once the concrete, culture-bound expressions of ancient pedagogy are properly abstracted, the underlying ethic of these passages emerges as one that seeks the child’s flourishing through steadfast guidance, moral clarity, and compassionate authority. It is precisely this deeper theological reading of discipline that invites comparison with later Catholic pedagogical traditions. Having established the exegetical and methodological foundations, we may now turn to a historical example in which this constructive approach to discipline is embodied with remarkable coherence: the educational vision of Saint John Bosco. His preventive system offers a concrete case study of how the principles outlined above can be enacted in a fully Catholic, child-centered practice of formation.

The Wisdom of Saint John Bosco: Methodology in Action

Saint John Bosco’s pedagogical model, known as the “preventive system,” stands in direct contrast to the “repressive system” that is traditionally associated with the use of corporal punishment and threats of severe consequences for disobedience. While the repressive system assumes that children require external control through fear and punishment, Don Bosco’s preventive approach centers on fostering a supportive environment that nurtures the intellectual, spiritual, and moral development of the child through nonviolent education. The preventive system is grounded in a vision of education that prioritizes the whole person—emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth. Bosco believed that lovingkindness (*amorevolezza*), coupled

with reason and religious faith, forms the cornerstone of effective pedagogy.²¹ His famous exhortation to educators to act as “guides, fathers, and friends” reflects this ethos, emphasizing trust-filled relationships where correction is grounded in empathy rather than coercion, as he elaborates on educators being “loving fathers” who “converse with [students], act as guides in every event, counsel them and lovingly correct them” (Bosco, 1844–1888/2017, pp. 248–257).

Moreover, Bosco’s approach rejects the idea of rules and discipline as mere instruments of control. Instead, he viewed these structures as opportunities for transformative growth. Rules, if not rooted in love and guided by the Spirit, risk fostering resentment rather than virtue.²² Bosco’s vision aligns with the theological insight that law alone is insufficient to lead individuals to genuine freedom and goodness without a foundation of love—a concept echoed in Saint Paul’s teachings on the Law and its inability to save without the transformative power of grace and love. Saint Paul’s reflections, particularly in Romans and Galatians, emphasize that the Law, while instructive, cannot by itself bring about salvation or inner renewal; it is through the Spirit and God’s love that individuals are moved to authentic freedom and a life of virtue.²³ Bosco’s educational philosophy embodies this principle, advocating for an environment where love precedes and fulfills the purpose of rules, fostering a deeper, heartfelt commitment to moral and spiritual growth.

²¹ When Saint John Bosco was nine, he had a dream where Jesus appeared to him as he tried to stop children his age from cursing through shouting and swinging his hands at them. In that dream, Christ said to him, “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love” (Bozzolo, 2023, p. 40). This dream was life-defining for the Italian saint, who went ahead and pursued a ministry of lovingkindness to children and orphans. In that ministry, “the heat and passion behind the use of his fists must become the driving force of love, and the disjointed energy of repressive intervention must make room for gentleness” (Bozzolo, 2023, p. 79).

²² For a more in-depth analysis of Saint Bosco’s pedagogical thoughts, see Braido (1999).

²³ See Romans 7:6 and Galatians 3:23–26 for Saint Paul’s teaching on the limits of the Law and the necessity of grace through the Spirit.

His method relied heavily on establishing strong, supportive relationships between educators and students, where guidance and correction were given with love and understanding. Rather than using corporal punishment to maintain order, Bosco promoted a system where preventive measures—such as ongoing dialogue, mutual respect, and positive reinforcement—helped avert misbehavior before it occurred. When presenting Don Bosco’s preventive system in relation to punishments (whether convenient or non-convenient, echoing 2 Timothy 4:2), Biesmans comments that Saint John Bosco’s categorical belief is that “corporal punishments are absolutely excluded” (Biesmans, 2015, p. 146). This philosophy led Bosco to advocate for an approach that was both firm and compassionate, where nonviolent correction was intended to build up the child rather than to instill fear or resentment.

The preventive system was also innovative in its emphasis on fostering a sense of belonging and community among the students. By creating a sense of family and trust within the educational setting, Saint John Bosco believed children were more likely to internalize moral lessons and behave according to their conscience rather than out of fear of punishment. This holistic approach to education sought not merely to control behavior, but to guide children to make morally sound decisions and develop a conscience informed by a strong sense of personal responsibility. Also, a unique feature of Bosco’s system was its emphasis on creating a familial and communal atmosphere within the educational environment. He believed that when children experience genuine care and a sense of belonging, they are more likely to internalize moral values and act out of personal conviction rather than fear of retribution. This idea is reflected in his focus on oratories, which functioned not merely as schools but as communities where education, recreation, and religious instruction intertwined seamlessly.²⁴

²⁴ As Lenti (2008) explains:

Don Bosco's approach was profoundly innovative, particularly for his time. By rejecting corporal punishment—a widespread disciplinary practice in the 19th century—and emphasizing preventative, relational, and formative measures, Bosco exemplified the kind of constructive pedagogy envisioned by the methodology outlined earlier in this article, being an avant-garde of inspiration to children toward self-regulation, and moral responsibility. Just as our reinterpretation of the wisdom texts advocates moving beyond literalist readings of corporal punishment toward guidance that cultivates virtue, conscience, and flourishing, Don Bosco's preventive system demonstrates these principles in practice. For him, education is a matter of the heart: Children respond best when treated with care, respect, and a sense of belonging, allowing moral responsibility and self-regulation to emerge organically. Ricaldone (1951) later described the preventive system as a pedagogy grounded “on the rock-solid [lit. granite] foundations of perennial philosophy and Catholic theology, while also drawing on data offered by other sciences such as psychology, biology, sociology, and so on” (p. 56, my translation),²⁵ highlighting how Saint John Bosco's approach integrates both theological insight and empirical understanding. In this way, his system serves as a concrete example of how a reading of biblical wisdom can inform and be informed by a holistic, developmentally sound approach to child-rearing.

Don Bosco had a comprehensive concept of education. It entailed the total development of the person, bringing out to the best possible effect the person's potentialities in view of the individual's functioning as a mature Christian adult in society—a good citizen and a good Christian, as he would say. (p. 139)

This is what Don Bosco called “the Salesian spirit” (Braido, 1989; Luna, 1995).

²⁵ For further engagement on the topic, see Vojtáš (2022, p. 255).

Conclusion

In light of the biblical data, a careful exegesis of the text, and neuropsychologically informed methodology, this article has defended a reexamination of Proverbs and Sirach on child-rearing, showing that such an interpretation is consistent, and not alien, with the scope, purpose, and style of wisdom literature. Through the application of neuropsychological data to the new methodology presented, exemplified by the Salesian principles left by Don Bosco, one can safely move beyond the literalistic sense of the rod and the violent corporal punishment present in these texts toward a more constructive and relational pedagogy that fosters moral formation, personal responsibility, and the flourishing of the whole child. From a Catholic approach to Sacred Scripture, which seeks to properly understand genre, literary analysis, redemptive-historical hermeneutic, and the insights from neuropsychology on the harmful effects of corporal punishment, one can interpret passages on child-rearing in a manner that honors both the spiritual significance of the passages and the dignity, flourishing, and moral formation of the child. Ultimately, Proverbs and Sirach point at discipline being key in the home and for a virtuous life; such discipline is intentional and is fundamentally an act of love that seeks the holistic good of the child. This movement from concrete-specific to abstract-universal principles of discipline and child-rearing reflects the dynamic and nuanced nature of wisdom literature, which seeks to impart timeless truths and values through concrete, culturally situated examples. By embracing this more nuanced understanding of Proverbs and Sirach, Catholic parents, educators, and caregivers can cultivate a more compassionate, effective, Salesian, and faithful approach to discipline and child-rearing, one that is grounded in the rich wisdom of Scripture and the Catholic tradition and always oriented toward the integral and eternal well-being of the whole child, body and soul.

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