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'Bathroom whupping' divides races

White woman claims she was fired for reporting spanking

Fewer topics are as culturally divisive as spankings.

If you are black, you probably call the act of disciplining a child with corporal punishment "a whupping."

While all blacks don't beat their children, and all whites don't view spankings as abuse, we do seem to be divided.

When the race of the person observing the spanking is white and the child getting whipped is black, it becomes even more complicated.

For instance, a federal court jury recently awarded a white woman \$200,000 in a discrimination case that involved "a bathroom whupping" of a 6-year-old African-American child.

In 2006, Cathleen Schandelmeier-Bartels was working as a cultural program coordinator at the South Shore Cultural Center, a Chicago Park District facility. Schandelmeier-Bartels alleged in the lawsuit that she was fired because she reported to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Service and the police that the 6-year-old's aunt beat him in the park district bathroom.

A federal jury agreed.

"I feel sad that the public has to pay for someone's mistake," Schandelmeier-Bartels said during a telephone interview.

Schandelmeier-Bartels claimed that after she complained, an African-American program coordinator told her "It's a black thing: We beat our children."

Later, when she took the matter to Andrea Adams, her supervisor, she was again told: "This is how we discipline our children in our culture."

She now feels vindicated.

"In my mind, this is the primary message: It is *not* a cultural prerogative to beat our children," Schandelmeier-Bartels said in a message she sent posted on her Facebook page.

No hitting 'no matter what,' she says

The Chicago Park District maintains that Schandelmeier-Bartels was not discriminated against. "Our position is that [she] was fired for lack of administrative ability to run the summer camp," a spokesman said.

The agency has not yet decided whether to appeal the jury verdict, and Schandelmeier-Bartels also has a suit pending in state court.

When it comes to abuse, Schandelmeier-Bartels is probably more sensitive than most. She has worked with the International

Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, and in 1996, she coordinated a video for the organization that got global attention. "I don't believe in ever spanking or hitting a child no matter what," she told me. "If someone else other than me had been outside that bathroom that day, I doubt that the incident would have been reported."

She's probably right.

'Whack' 'Ow' 'Whack' 'Ow' 'Whack' 'Ow'

For those of you who don't know, a "bathroom whupping" usually happens after a child has acted out repeatedly in school or in public. In this case, the 6-year-old boy

had gotten five write-ups for bad behavior during the summer program. A phone call was made to his mother, and his aunt picked him up.

The aunt asked Schandelmeier-Bartels "where the bathroom was."

When she returned to where she left the boy and his aunt, Schandelmeier-Bartels said she heard "Whack" "Ow" "Whack" "Ow" "Whack" "Ow" several times, according to the suit. She reported what she considered abuse to the state and the police.

The next day, the boy's aunt complained to Andrea Adams, the supervisor at

the cultural center.

Schandelmeier-Bartels said her supervisor "yelled at" her, and told her to get out of her sight.

"Just because you don't beat your child doesn't mean she can't beat hers," Schandelmeier-Bartels said she was told. "Who are you to tell her how to raise her child?"

Obviously, spanking is not a "black thing," although it is perceived as such by many. Despite the ongoing debate, spanking is still viewed as an acceptable way to discipline unruly children by a lot of people.

There also is a difference between physically disciplining a child and abusing one.

Still, I can understand why Schandelmeier-Bartels, who is an advocate against physical discipline, did what she did.

But the Chicago Park District employees involved in this incident were the people who acted irresponsibly.

When a 6-year-old boy misbehaves to the point that he is about to be suspended from a summer program, he could be crying out for help. Unfortunately, Chicago Park District employees may have missed that because they couldn't see beyond Schandelmeier-Bartels' race.

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Cathleen Schandelmeier-Bartels says her boss told her "It's a black thing."

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