Thank you. Well, as you can see, I’m going to be talking about spanking by parents, which I call primordial violence, because it starts for about one-third of American children in infancy, before age one. But, looking over the program, I was glad that our first presentation mentioned spanking, because, perhaps a better title for this would be, “Spanking: The Missing Person from this Meeting,” because no one else is addressing it and it is the most prevalent form of violence experienced by children around the world.

I’ve talked to hundreds of parents who say, “Well, spanking isn’t violence. I’m not violent to my kids; I just spank them when necessary.” So, you have to decide for yourself whether a swat on the butt is violence or not. And in deciding that, just think about someone three times your size who gave you just a swat on the butt. And if you still think it’s not violence, well then, that indicates something about the culture of standards of our society and what we define as violence, rather than as a physical act.

I’m going to address seven questions: What percent of parents spank and how often? Does spanking really have harmful side effects? If spanking is done by loving parents, is it still harmful? Is spanking sometimes necessary because it works better than other methods? Then the question that I get all the time: “I was spanked, but I don’t have all of these problems, how can that be?” Is it ethical to advise parents to never spank? And, is attempting to end spanking realistic and practical?
So, what percent of parents spank? Here are results from one of our national surveys of a nationally representative sample of U.S. children [shows slide]. You can see that more than one-third were hit as infants before age one; over 90 percent were hit when they were toddlers. Even by age 13, it’s one-third and, for some kids, it continues until they leave home; here at age 16, it is one out of four. And how often do parents do it?—far more often than they think. People don’t keep a tally in this instance, it’s literally and figuratively an everyday event. Here [showing a slide] is a result from a study showing an average of two to three times per week and, in my opinion, those are considerable underestimates, because parents don’t keep a tally of it.

Now, getting back to the question of spanking a child to correct behavior: If spanking to correct behavior is violence, then we have to say that children in most of the world are brought up more violently than is generally realized. In the USA for example, spanking is more prevalent than most people realize; including child psychologists. Over 90 percent of toddlers are spanked. It’s more chronic: An average of at least three times a week for toddlers; it’s more severe: 28 percent of parents use a belt or paddle or hairbrush. This judge in Texas who used a belt is not that rare. I think it was more rare in how it went on for at least the seven minutes of that awful videotape, which was very hard to watch, but 28 percent use a belt, paddle or hairbrush or something like that. It’s a longer duration than most people realize: It goes on for 13 years for a third of U.S. children. So, I conclude from this that more children are victimized by spanking than by any other form of violence, and that’s why I call it the missing person from this meeting. Now, it is included in the adverse childhood experiences survey and in many other surveys. In fact there are hundreds, maybe a thousand of these surveys in which spanking is one of the items. But you can’t tell anything about spanking from those surveys, because they give you the results for the composite, which consists of spanking plus a dozen other things, and you don’t know just what effect the spanking part of it has.

So, question two: Does spanking really have harmful side effects? Here’s a summary of a meta-analysis of 88 studies [shows a slide]. Unusually high agreement between these studies compared to other studies in child development—93 percent agreement on harmful effects, including less moral internalization; 87 percent agreement, that there is more aggression in proportion to the amount of spanking; 100 percent in
every single study, that it produces more delinquency and antisocial behavior and on and on. I’ll go to the next slide because of time constraints, but you can get this from me, just Google my name and you’ll get to my website.

It also affects—[showing a slide]—these are effects on children that continue to affect them when they become adults, including more aggression, for example, more hitting of dating partners, marital partners or cohabiting partners. Every study has been double this number since this meta-analysis was published in 2002; every single one of them, without exception shows more hitting of partners in proportion to how much spanking was experienced as a child. And, as I’ve said, it’s probably the largest single risk factor for physical abuse. About two-thirds of cases, in four different studies of physical abuse cases that came to the attention of child protective services, started out as spanking and then escalated into injury. So the adverse effects are not only directly on the children, but in increasing their exposure to much more severe assaults. Now, only a minute tiny, tiny fraction of spanking results in physical abuse, very tiny fraction, but two-thirds of cases of physical abuse started out as spanking.

Does spanking teach him a lesson he won’t forget? Yes, but the opposite of what parents intended happens more often, because a specific thing, like clean up your room—that is learned, but along with that we get an increase in the probability of subsequent antisocial behavior and delinquency. Here’s an example [showing a slide] of a longitudinal study that my colleagues and I did over a two-year period, studying a national sample of children. And this zero on the vertical axis is no change in antisocial behavior as compared to other kids. The non-spanked kids went down in antisocial behavior; the spanked kids all went up in proportion to how much. This is the best kept secret in American child psychology, that children who were never spanked are the best behaved; they’re not kids out of control and they are the best behaved. Well, some are out of control, but so are some kids who are spanked. On average, they are the best behaved. Here [showing another slide] are four of 15 longitudinal studies—I don’t have time to go through them—but the importance of these is that these are all longitudinal studies that controlled for the level of misbehavior that led parents to spank. So these studies are all studies that show you whether spanking results in an increase in misbehavior, rather than a decrease. There are 15 such studies there [that all indicate an increase].
If spanking is done by loving and attentive parents, is spanking harmless? Well looking at the effect on delinquency, the percent of delinquency is less. Here on the bottom [of the slide] are the high positive parents; the high positive parenting results in less delinquency. There is a large difference, a very important difference, but regardless of whether there’s a lot of positive parenting or very little, the more spanking, the greater the probability of the child getting in trouble with the law.

Question four: Does spanking work better than other methods? Well in order to understand this, you have to understand that with a 2-year-old, nothing works. The recidivism rate, for whatever a 2-year-old is corrected for, is about 50 percent within two hours and close to 100 percent in the same day. So, when parents say “no,” or provide some other activity, or explain and the child repeats the crime, they think “this isn’t working, I guess I’ll have to spank.” But if they would do the same thing through spanking, they would find the same result. Here’s the number of hours to repetition of the misbehavior for spanking only, five hours [indicating a slide]. They’re all about the same, none of these are statistically significant differences—even this one, which is high use of reasoning and non-corporal punishment, which produces the longest delay before repetition, but it isn’t statistically significant because the sample size for this study was small. So question four: Is spanking sometimes necessary? No, it’s not. It does work, but no better than other methods of correction and it has these long-term harmful effects, which make it less effective. There have been more than 100 studies that have found spanking is associated with a subsequent increase in behavior problems. There have been no studies which have found that spanking is associated with a subsequent improvement in child behaviour problems, not a single study.

Question five: If spanking has harmful side effects like physical aggression, how come I’m not physically aggressive and don’t have all of these other problems, no crimes committed and so forth? Well, you have to remember that spanking, like almost everything else we study in social science and medicine, has a risk-factor relationship, rather than a one-to-one relationship. For example, if you’re a heavy smoker, are you going to die of a smoking-related disease? Well, a third of heavy smokers will, but two-thirds won’t. That one-third is pretty awful, but the other side, pretty good, two-thirds won’t. Binge drinking, in our research we found a three-fold increase in assaulting a wife
by men who are binge drinkers; it goes up from 6 to 7 percent to 19 percent, but 19 percent means that 81 percent of binge drinkers do not beat their wives. Frequent spanking and delinquency have the same type of risk factor—rather than one-to-one—relationship.

Question six: Is it ethical to recommend “never spank” if the evidence of serious harmful side effects is strong, but not absolutely conclusive? It is not absolutely conclusive. There have been no randomized trials, assigning people “spank” or “not spank” roles, which would be conclusive evidence, just as there have been no randomized trials in which people have been assigned “smoke heavily” or “not smoke heavily,” but we still conclude that smoking is a cause of many smoking-related illnesses. The evidence is pretty strong, even though not absolutely conclusive. The general principle is if there’s an equally or more effective alternative that doesn’t have the side effects, then it’s not only ethical, it’s morally required to use it. You wouldn’t, if you were a physician, you wouldn’t prescribe a drug with known side effects, even if that drug worked, if there was an alternative drug that worked but didn’t have the side effects.

And question seven: Is attempting to end spanking realistic and practical? Sweden was a high spanking country in the 1950s—97 percent in one study in Stockholm and most did it at least once a day. It’s now become a nation in which there is very little spanking; there are different estimates, 10 to 30 percent, but let’s say 20 percent. It’s been very successful and we have the United Nations and the European Union asking all member nations to ban spanking—24 nations when I made this slide up, about 30 now, prohibit parents from using spanking. It’s part of a worldwide trend to create more humane social relationships in which children are finally getting the benefit. In my opinion, ending spanking will happen sooner or later. If sooner, children, families and the entire nation will benefit sooner.

Thank you.