

Children's and adults' attitudes towards parents smacking their children

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Australian children's interests groups are campaigning for legislation to prohibit adults from using physical punishment with children. In this study, 100 South Australian children, early childhood university students and parents were questioned about their personal experiences of physical punishment in childhood. All three groups had strong negative recollections of being smacked. All of the adult subjects agreed that physical violence is damaging to children's psychological development and they knew that smacking is banned in South Australian state schools and pre-schools. Nevertheless a significant number (79%) used physical punishment for disciplining their own children. Furthermore, 80% of parents and early childhood education students opposed State legislation to ban hand-smacking and only 50% approved legislation to ban adults from hitting children with an implement. Although the university students had been taught and used positive child management techniques in schools and pre-schools, 65% said that they would smack their own children for 'naughty' behaviour. The study suggests that early learning (even learning of a negative nature) can take precedence over professionally gained knowledge and professional practice. Advocacy groups would be advised to press for community education encouraging the use of alternative child management techniques before introducing changes to legislation.

Smacking is a familiar term to most Australians. Whether they are smackers, have been smacked or know of parents who currently smack their children, most adults have strong opinions about the value of 'smacking' as a discipline method. Physical punishment is often associated with responsible parenting - to guide, set limits for safety reasons and promote acceptable social behaviour. In American society, there is widespread acceptance of physical punishment to discipline children (Berk, 1991). It has been estimated that over 90% of American parents use physical punishment (Straus, 1991).

Australian parents may be unaware of the influence of early settlers on the style of discipline used today. Early Australian society was settled by convicts and European migrants who brought their

beliefs, fashions and lifestyles with them. This also included values and attitudes towards children (Briggs, 1993), such as the view that children 'were born in original sin' (Schorsch, 1979:30) and that sin had to be beaten out of them (Gathorne-Hardy, 1974). These views stemmed from the religious ideas of the sixteenth century, in particular 'the Protestant conception of original sin' (Berk, 1991:4).

The most common form of 'discipline' involved flogging. It was believed that this encouraged children to be honest, truthful and obedient to God. As a result, objections to this type of brutality were rare. Reports show that 'flogging was a common punishment in colonial schools and society' and experts recommended the use of physical punishment for 'open defiance' (Burns & Goodnow, 1979: 157). The belief in the value of physical punishment was implicit in the popular saying, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'.

According to current South Australian legislation (*Community Welfare Act, 1972* - section 92), it is permissible to physically punish a child if it is 'reasonable' and 'moderate' punishment. The

standard that applies is that of the general community, not that of any particular group. Circumstances can include the relationship between the child and the adult, the child's age, what was used to inflict the punishment (for example, canes have been declared lawful but not loaded guns), where the child is hit and how frequently (Castell-McGregor & Schepers, 1991).

Parents can be charged under the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935* (section 29) if it is found that more than reasonable force was used, resulting in injuries requiring medical attention. Although the law attempts to offer protection to children because of their immaturity and vulnerability, the exception is from physical punishment. Children are denied the protection against assault that adults take for granted. Legislation is now considered to be out of date, failing to reflect changes in child development theories, attitudes to child rearing and children's need for better protection (Castell-McGregor & Scheppers, 1991).

The term 'smack' is difficult to define. The *Macquarie Dictionary* (1990) interprets a 'smack' or a 'spank' as:

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- to strike smartly especially with an open hand;
- to come or strike smartly or forcibly, as against something;
- a smart resounding blow especially with something flat;
- to move quickly, vigorously or smartly;
- to strike (a person, usually a child) with an open hand, slipper etc., especially on the buttocks, as in punishment.

Straus (1991) describes a smack as a 'legal physical attack on children' and lists the most common forms of smacking as spanking, slapping, grabbing and shoving a child roughly with more force than is necessary to move the child. Hitting a child with an object is also legally permissible and widespread.

From the definitions available, a smack can be interpreted as a form of physical punishment usually aimed at children by parents.

Aims of research

Children's advocacy groups have long campaigned for legislation that offers greater protection to children from physical punishment at home. Before there are major legislative changes, detailed information is needed relating to use of and attitudes towards smacking as a form of punishment. This will determine the level of community education needed for legislation to be effective.

This study was designed to:

- establish parents' attitudes to smacking their children;
- establish why, when and what implements were used for smacking;
- obtain new information on how children feel about being smacked;
- identify the opinions of early childhood personnel and parents on legislation to ban smacking; and
- establish the attitudes of early childhood personnel who have been trained to use positive child management strategies for controlling children's behaviour in the work place.

Methodology

Three random samples were used in the survey: 17 children with a mean age of 8 years who represented low and middle class socio-economic groups; 49 early childhood education and child care students studying at the University of South Australia; and 34 parents representing 34 families. The parents comprised of a random sample who represented low and middle socio-economic groups. The parents were not the parents of the 17 children involved in the study.

The children were interviewed in their own homes using a questionnaire devised to extract information relating to children's experiences of receiving physical punishment: by whom, why, with what and on which part of the body. Their feelings were investigated: for example: did they deserve to be smacked and what form of punishment would have been most appropriate. They were also asked whether they would smack their own children when they became parents.

The questionnaire used with the students and parents was broadly similar with additional questions relating to their views on legislation and the use of smacking as a deterrent or punishment.

Subjects were asked to identify the age at which smacking could be introduced as a punishment for children. Parents were also asked whether they had tried alternatives to smacking, what methods were used and whether they were effective.

Both students and parents were asked: 'Should it be against the law to:

- a) smack a child with an open hand without causing lasting injury; and
- b) hit a child with an implement without causing lasting injury?'

The researcher used Straus' (1991) interpretation of a 'smack' which included spanking, slapping and grabbing a child. These terms were listed in the questionnaires.

Results

The study revealed that the majority of subjects in all three samples were smacked or had been smacked during childhood.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

Ninety-four percent of child subjects claimed to have been smacked for being 'naughty' and 82% claimed that this happened at home. Children reported that 58% of physical punishment was administered by both parents with an additional 12% being smacked only by the mother and 12% only by the father. Fifty-two percent reported that the father smacked the hardest.

Children reported that hands and implements were used to administer punishment; 36% were smacked with a flat hand and 36% with a wooden spoon. Other implements used by parents included bamboo sticks and straps. The most common location for a smack was the child's buttocks (55%) with an additional 34% claiming that they were smacked on other parts of the body. Seventeen percent recalled being smacked only on one part of the body, for example

the face, back or hand. A further 5.8% reported that they were smacked on the body and hand.

The children reported a variety of reactions to physical punishment. Fifty percent of the sample reported being distressed and many voluntarily withdrew to their rooms; 50% screamed or cried and a further 25% did nothing, answered back, swore or continued playing. When asked why they became upset, 41% felt distressed because of the emotional implications of being smacked and 35% responded that 'smacks hurt'.

When asked if they deserved to be smacked, 18% of the children said 'yes', 41% said 'no' and 35% reported that they sometimes deserved a smack.

A majority of the children (64%) reported that they had 'done something wrong' prior to being smacked. These offences included calling parents rude names, shouting at parents and siblings and disobeying instructions. Eighteen percent of children did not know why they were smacked. They resented punishment because they believed that they had done 'nothing' to deserve it.

Although they hated being smacked, when asked if they would smack their own offspring, 35% of the children believed that they would. Forty-seven percent reported that they did not intend to use physical punishment on children while a further 18% would only resort to it for serious misbehaviours.

Interestingly, all of the child subjects were able to suggest alternatives to 'smacking'. Twenty-nine percent thought it more appropriate to deprive 'naughty' children of treats, 12% preferred negotiation, 12% isolation and an alarming 6% thought that it was appropriate to deprive 'naughty' children of basic needs such as meals and drinks.

Table 1: Responses of children, mean age 8 (N=17)

Children's experiences	%
smacked in childhood	94
smacked with a flat hand	36
smacked with a wooden spoon	36
distressed by physical punishment	50
intended to smack their own children for unacceptable behaviours	53

THE EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CHILD CARE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Eighty-nine percent of the student sample reported that they were smacked by parents

during their childhood. Forty-six percent were smacked by both parents, 16% by their mothers only, 20% by fathers only and 12% by both their parents and other family members.

The majority of the university students (78%) reported that the hand was most commonly used by parents. Twenty-four percent were assaulted with a wooden spoon and 10% with a belt.

Fifty-five percent of students reported that the most common site for smacks was on the buttocks. A further 34% they were smacked on the face, head and legs. Twenty percent of the sample received smacks on the hands and other parts of the body.

Sixty-eight percent of students felt that, at the time of the smacking, they deserved to be physically punished; an additional 14% considered that they were smacked indiscriminately.

Sixty percent of the early childhood students believed that parents should have the right to smack their children. When asked about the age at which physical punishment was appropriate, 2% suggested when the child reaches 12 months, 2% suggested over 18 months of age, 4% over 2 years and a further 16% over 4 years.

Although early childhood professionals are not allowed to use physical punishments in schools and preschools, and all subjects had been trained to use alternative strategies, 65% said that they would smack their own children 'to instil discipline', 'punish naughtiness', teach children civilised manners and raise their children as they were raised. This suggests that child-rearing practices are passed from one generation to another regardless of professional education.

PARENTS USING PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT TO DISCIPLINE CHILDREN.

Seventy-nine percent of the parent subjects reported that they used physical punishment to discipline their children. In 49% of homes physical punishment was carried out by both parents; in 27%, it was administered only by fathers and an additional 15% was administered only by the mothers.

Eighty-two percent of smackers reported that they relied on an open hand, 12% used a wooden spoon and 3% used a belt. The preferred area for smacking was the child's buttocks (46%) although 32% of subjects also indicated that they smacked children on other parts of the body. This was explained as 'taking a swipe' or 'the child resisted and the smack landed elsewhere'. A minority of parents (3%) reported that they smacked 'anywhere on the body'.

Table 2: Responses of student Early Childhood educators (N=49)

Early Childhood students	%
smacked in childhood	89
smacked with a flat hand	78
smacked with a wooden spoon	24
smacked with a belt	10
felt they deserved to be physically punished at the time	68
believe that parents have the right to smack their children	60
would smack their children to stop unwanted behaviours	65

All parent subjects recalled children's negative reactions after physical punishment. These reactions included crying (37%), defiance (21%), distress (15%), fear (12%), resentment (6%) and children's recognition that the parent(s) 'had reached their limit'.

Table 3: Responses of parents (N=34 parents representing 34 families)

Parents' use of physical punishment	%
smacks children to punish or stop unwanted behaviours	79
smacks with a flat hand	82
smacks with a wooden spoon	12
uses physical punishment for 'discipline'	65
has uneasy feelings after administering physical punishment	59

More than half of the parent sample (59%) experienced feelings of unease after administering punishment. A further 29% felt 'all right about it' and 9% considered that it was 'the child's own fault'. Discipline was the most frequently cited reason for using physical punishment (65%) with an additional 26% using it for both discipline and safety reasons.

The most appropriate age for introducing smacking varied considerably across the parent sample. Six percent believed that it was appropriate to smack a child at 6 months, 26% at 12 months, 20% at 2 years, 18% at 3 years and a further 3% at 10 years.

All of the parents interviewed reported that they had tried alternative methods of punishment. Ninety-seven percent found that these methods 'sometimes worked' and 3% experienced no success at all.

Alternatives included; isolating the child, 'time out', withdrawing privileges, talking it over, bribing, writing an essay about the incident and removal of favourite toys. Physical punishment on the other hand, was deemed to be 100% successful in stopping undesirable behaviour.

When asked if they smacked children in public, 50% of parent subjects admitted that they did.

Parents were also asked 'If you see a child being smacked in public, do you identify with the parent or worry about the child?' Thirty-two percent of parents responded that it depended on the circumstances and the extremity of the punishment; 22% believed that what parents do with their own children is 'no-one else's business', 19% identified uncritically with the parents and a further 12% worried about the child's feelings.

PARENTS - PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT DURING CHILDHOOD.

A significant majority (97%) of the parent subjects reported that they were physically punished in childhood. Seventy-eight percent claimed that they were assaulted with an open hand, an additional 15% with a wooden stick and 3% with a belt.

Most parents had strong negative emotions about the receipt of physical punishment. Sixty-one percent remembered being upset, angry, humiliated, scared, frustrated, unsure and confused. Twenty-four percent of the sample either considered that they deserved to be smacked or they accepted it as 'normal'. Nine percent were indifferent to the physical punishment.

It is important to note that although most parents' reacted negatively to being smacked in childhood, 79% of the sample considered that it was 'appropriate' to smack their own children.

Table 4 Parents' childhood experiences

Parents' experiences	%
smacked in childhood	97
smacked with a flat hand	78
smacked with implements	18
expressed negative emotions associated with physical punishment	61

LEGISLATION CHANGES TO THE USE OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT ON CHILDREN.

Early childhood students and parents were asked whether it should be against the law to (a) smack a child with an open hand without causing lasting injury; and (b) hit a child with an implement without

causing lasting injury. A significant majority of students (88%) and parents (92%) did not support changes to legislation which would prohibit smacking with an open hand. Only 57% of students and 56% of parents, supported changes to legislation that would ban smacking a child with an implement.

Discussion

The data shows that although all children disliked being smacked, physical punishment is commonly accepted and used by parents as a form of punishment for breaches of discipline. Parents and early childhood professionals in training have a broad concept of discipline which does not relate to a specific level of misbehaviour. Subjects also revealed a wide variety of definitions for what constituted 'bad', 'very naughty' and 'naughty' behaviour. Using a continuum with 'naughty' at one extreme and 'very bad' at the other, value judgements were varied as to what constituted the behaviour in each category.

The study showed that there is a strong link between how children are punished and how they punish their own children in later years. Although 94% of children were smacked and hated it, 35% intended to smack their own children when they became parents. Acceptance increased with the age of the subjects, and a far higher proportion of tertiary students (65%) thought it was appropriate to smack their own children. This is particularly significant given that all of these subjects had been trained to work in early childhood and child care services, and all had been taught to use positive child management techniques in the work place. It suggests that we separate our professional role from our family role even when there is an overlap, as in the management of children. This is worthy of further investigation.

Despite the fact that most parents experienced negative feelings after smacking their children, they still felt that smacking was essential as the ultimate, reliable deterrent for maintaining discipline. It is also important to note that although the children in the sample hated smacks, they had been conditioned to smacking as an appropriate form of punishment. Thirty-five percent of child subjects said that when they were smacked, they had always 'done something to deserve it'.

Adults were overwhelmingly opposed to legislation that would ban them from smacking with an open hand without causing lasting injury. When asked about the prohibition of smacking using an implement, adults responded more cau-

iously and less than half of the subjects considered that parents should be able to use an implement for smacking.

Some of the comments made by parents were that 'smacking a child should be the basic right of every parent to enable children to understand right from wrong' and 'parents should have the choice'. Hitting with an implement was viewed as 'child abuse' at one end of the continuum and 'acceptable' at the other.

There appears to be a common fear among parents that the prohibition of smacking will reduce their capacity to control their children and their family lives.

The only positive aspect of the study was that today's children were subjected to less smacking (82%) than either the parents group (97%) or the students (94%).

Recommendations

This list of recommendations has been compiled after a thorough examination of the findings. This is not an exhaustive list but represents the major concerns of the researcher.

1. Non-smacking parenting: Most adults accept smacking as essential for disciplining children. Education relating to positive child management techniques should be introduced to secondary students in family related studies.
2. Advocates for children who campaign for changes to legislation relating to physical punishment should proceed slowly because of the lack of public support. The banning of implements as weapons for punishing children would be acceptable to some parents but any legislative change should be preceded by education on effective child rearing practices incorporating positive reinforcement and management techniques. It should be noted that, Sweden's initiative to prohibit smacking (1979), was preceded by intensive education programs which included the use of milk cartons that explained the changes (EPOCH, undated).
3. Australia is becoming a multi-cultural society. Attempts should be made to investigate different methods of disciplining children by parents in other cultures in Australia.
4. Further research should be undertaken to:
 - involve a larger sample of parents and children given the comparatively small samples;

- determine whether child smacking is now a feature of Australian culture (handed down from generation to generation);
- investigate behaviour management strategies used by professionals in the work place and those used when disciplining their own children;
- determine whether physical assault is accepted in other cultural groups in Australia;
- determine why specific parts of the body are selected by parents for physical assault; and - determine if there is any relationship between child/ adolescent anti-social behaviour and parenting that involves indiscriminate or frequent smacking.

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