

Physical punishment in child rearing

A background paper to the campaign for EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children) in Australia.

Peter Boss

With attention focussed on child abuse and measures for child protection in many countries around the world, efforts have been made to understand something of the nature and dimensions that lie behind abuse. Now the time has come to look at domestic violence in its other manifestations - not only parent to child as in child abuse, but also husband to wife or cohabiter to cohabiter. What, however, has been missing from this widening of concerns has been a focus on parental behaviour toward their children which involves the use of physical punishment in child rearing but which may fall short of the legal definition of abuse. This gap is about to be considered with the emergence in Australia of the EPOCH campaign in which Oz Child is to be a leading participant.

EPOCH - its origins and current spread

The organisation known as EPOCH was launched in London UK in 1989. It is essentially a single-issue organisation, being concerned to end of physical punishment, of any kind or degree, of children of any age. This ranges from a total ban on smacking to a ban on the use of any instrument for hitting children. The campaign measures used by EPOCH (UK) are public education and information dissemination on the use and misuse of physical punishment, its effects through the community on children and its ripple-effects and also the availability of alternatives to physical punishment. It also advocates changes in the law which would ban physical punishment (Newell 1989).

Since the advent of EPOCH (UK), the campaign has spread to other countries including USA, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Switzerland, Chile and New

Zealand. There is now an informal alliance of organisations called EPOCH Worldwide sharing the aim of ending all physical punishment of children by education and legal reform. It is administered through the EPOCH UK office. The Council of Europe has adopted two recommendations urging member countries to review their law on punishment and consider full prohibition. (Recommendations R85/4 and R90/2). Each country is at a different stage of development of abolishing physical punishment; in some countries the government is considering the case, in others this stage has not yet been reached. In five European countries physical punishment has already been banned (see below).

Defining physical punishment

In this paper physical punishment is the term used, rather than corporal punishment which has the same meaning but is often associated with physical punishment in schools and children's institutions. (NASW 1990).

EPOCH defines physical punishment thus:

Any punishment in which physical force is intended to cause pain or discomfort: hitting children with a hand, or with a cane, strap or other object, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching or pulling their hair, locking or tying them up.

There are other harmful and humiliating kinds of punishment, but physical punishment is our focus because it is clearly defined, frequently used, its harmful effects have been well-demonstrated, and in most societies children are the only people who are not protected from it.

(EPOCH Worldwide, 1992)

The National Association of Social Workers (USA) describes physical punishment as that which:

...most commonly consists of hitting a child with the hand, but it also includes such things as washing the mouth out

with soap or shaking. Physical punishment becomes abuse when the child is physically injured or placed at risk of being physically injured as a result of the adult's action. Forms of abuse that adults sometimes practice when physically punishing children include spanking with a belt, kicking, biting, arm twisting, or throwing children against a wall or floor.

(NASW 1990)

A few points in these definitions are worth noting:

- between them they cover most things parents are likely to do by way of physically punishing their children.
- there is a kind of escalation continuum that can occur: it can start with a spanking or smacking (these terms themselves are euphemistic ways of suggesting that the physical punishment of children differs from other forms of violence) but at some point along the line can escalate into child abuse, and Australian child abuse laws do not cover light physical punishment.
- the prohibition on physical punishment is absolute according to these definitions, there are no exceptions even in situations where the child's own or other people's safety is involved. It is the absolute nature of prohibiting spanking that could alienate those people who might otherwise agree to its abolition but who cannot see the harm caused by the occasional smack on the hand or backside of a rebellious or tantrum-struck toddler.

Australian laws with a bearing on physical punishment

There are three aspects to be considered under this heading: firstly, the area of child abuse which includes physical abuse, and which concerns only persons under 18 years of age; secondly, there is that area of law which covers all persons, such as laws of assault and battery. The third area is where case law says something about the reasonableness or otherwise regarding parental discipline of children.

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So far as child abuse is concerned, all the Australian jurisdictions now have extensive definitions covering physical and other forms of abuse. Physical abuse has been summarised by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as meaning that it occurs when:

...a person having the care of a child inflicts or allows to be inflicted on the child a physical injury or deprivation which may create a substantial risk of death, disfigurement or the impairment of either physical health and development or emotional health or development
(Angus G. et al 1994)

It is clear that child abuse laws could not cover the light and occasional smacks that a parent inflicts since they would not create a danger to health or development. Equally clearly though, there is a point along the continuum of physical punishment when a smack or tap escalates into spanking and spanking into beating and so on along the line to the point where abuse laws or the criminal law can be invoked.

Australian laws on assault and battery also hardly fit the bill at the mild end of the continuum of physical punishment. An assault is any direct threat by a person which places another person in reasonable apprehension of imminent bodily contact and battery is a direct act of one person which has the effect of causing harmful or offensive contact with the body of another person. It is arguable whether either assault or battery laws would be used in cases of physical punishment where that punishment is mild.

Australian case law supports the widespread belief that parents have a right to smack their children. Whilst this is a correct assumption, it is so within strict limits which are recorded in a case that came before the Victorian Supreme Court in 1954. *R. v Terry* (1954) was a case where a child of 19 months of age was killed by the cohabitant of the child's mother. The judge set down that:

...a parent has a lawful right to inflict reasonable and moderate corporal punishment on his or her child for the purpose of correcting the child in wrong behaviour, but there are exceedingly strict limits to that right. In the first place, the punishment must be moderate and reasonable. In the second place, it must have a proper relation to the age, physique and mentality of the child, and in the third place, it must be carried out with a reasonable means or instrument.

This particular case failed this test, the Judge saying that a parent is not lawfully entitled to administer to an infant girl of 19 months any physical punishment except of the slightest description, eg, a

slight slap at the very most (*R. v Terry* [1955] VLR., 114).

In this context, it is interesting to refer to New Zealand law. There, the Crimes Act 1961 section 59 states on the matter of domestic discipline:

1. every parent of a child and subject to subsection (3) of this section, every person in the place of the parent of a child is justified in using force by way of correction towards the child, if the force used is reasonable in the circumstances
2. the reasonableness of the force used is a question of fact
3. nothing in sub section (1) of this section justifies the use of force towards a child in Act contravention of section 139A of the Education 1989.

The former New Zealand Commissioner for Children, Ian Hassall, spearheaded a campaign to get section 59 off the statute book, with a regime of no hitting of children to be introduced instead (Office of the Commissioner for Children, NZ).

Returning to Australia and sidestepping for a moment into the arena of education, it is interesting to note that while corporal punishment (sic) in state schools is prohibited by education regulations or policy in South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, it is still permitted in Queensland Tasmania and the Northern Territory, and in New South Wales subject to parental veto. Corporal punishment is also permitted in non-government schools throughout Australia but its use as a disciplinary measure is dependent on the policy of each school (Boss, Edwards & Pitman)

Physical punishment of a child, from smacking upwards, is widely prevalent and is approved of by many people in many countries. However, an examination of what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states about the rights of children and parental rights in this context is interesting.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The early efforts of the advocates for the abolition of physical punishment of children were no doubt enhanced by the advent of the Convention in 1989. The Convention has focussed the attention of almost all countries around the world on the place of physical punishment. Article 19 (1) requires countries to:

...take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including

sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Peter Newell (1994), at a seminar in Melbourne, cited the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as stating at its fourth session (CRC/C/20, 25 October 1993) that:

...the Committee recognised the importance of the question of corporal punishment in improving the system of promotion and protection of the rights of the child and decided to continue to devote attention to it in the process of examining the States Parties reports.

Newell claims that members of the Committee have several times emphasised that corporal punishment is not compatible with the Convention. The Committee was intended to prompt those in authority in each country to find the most effective way in their own societies to break cycles of violence that were often perpetuated from generation to generation under the cover of tradition and custom (CRC/C/SR. 136 para 41).

Article 19 (1) is complemented by Articles 2 and 37 which refer to punishment of the child in somewhat different contexts. Article 5, however, states:

States Parties shall respect the responsibilities and duties of parents or where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by the local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.

It may just be construed by some who would oppose the abolition of physical punishment that Article 5 holds that parents must be deemed the best judges of what is best for the child appropriate to the child's level of maturity and if smacking is sanctioned in the culture and endorsed in law, that Article 5 may clash with Article 19.1.

How prevalent is physical punishment?

Both empirical research and anecdotal evidence confirm the impression that physical punishment of young children is highly prevalent in advanced industrialised societies. The English-speaking countries widely report it. The smacking of young children is almost a universal practice and can start before the child is even one year old. John and Elizabeth Newson, who have researched for over 40 years in the area of early childhood in the UK, are international authorities on the subject. In 1958, they reported that in their sample

of 700 mothers, 62% indicated that they used physical punishment to discipline their one-year old babies, a proportion that changed to 63% in 1985. At four years old:

...hardly anyone was ever smacking their four-year old and only a quarter overall were smacking less than once a week....there is a massive majority of children who get a smack at least once a week, going up to six days a week, and this is the majority in all social classes....

What is more the 'enormous majority' of mothers, 83%, believes in smacking more than are actually using it very much and again class differences are insignificant. (Newson & Newson, 1989).

Similar conclusions are reached in other countries. In a review of literature relating to the discipline of children, Burns (1993) cites the following statistics taken from studies in a wide range of countries:

- In the USA in a study of 3,200 families, 89% of parents had hit their three-year-old children during the previous year;
- in Korea a 1982 study found 97% of children interviewed had been physically punished, many severely;
- a study in India in 1991 showed 91% of boys and 86% of girls had been physically punished in childhood;
- in Germany in 1988, an opinion poll found 60% of fathers and 70% of mothers who admitted to hitting their children;
- in Romania, a 1992 study found that 84% of parents regarded spanking as normal and 96% did not consider it humiliating.

Burns also cites two large cross-cultural samples undertaken in the past five years which conclude the same two things: first, the more that conformity is valued relative to self-reliance in the child, the more physical punishment is used in child rearing. Second, children are more likely to be punished in societies where there are a large number of single parent households.

Empirical evidence from Australia is sparse. The most informative research was undertaken by Paul Amato in 1987 in which he studied the growth of competence in children and included interviews with some 400 children, half in the primary school age group and half secondary. Reproduced below is the table that provides the various forms of disciplining experienced and reported by the children involved and broken down by children's gender, age groups and gender of the parents (Amato, 1987).

Percentage of children reporting the use of punishment methods by mothers & fathers

Form of punishment		Primary school		Secondary school	
		Boys (n=89)	Girls (n=96)	Boys (n=96)	Girls (n=111)
Yell at you	mother	94	96	86	84
	father	78	82	69	64
Hit you	mother	81	74	14	17
	father	76	63	30	22
Send you to your room	mother	81	71	33	17
	father	66	51	22	17
Stop you from watching television	mother	60	63	53	48
	father	54	45	50	42
Stop you from seeing your friends	mother	53	39	10	21
	father	39	20	12	21
Make fun of you	mother	12	8	6	16
	father	12	6	14	20
Tell you they don't love you	mother	6	2	6	4
	father	4	0	6	2

So far as physical punishment is concerned, this is high on the listed alternatives of methods varying with age and gender but showing substantial percentages at the lower age levels. The findings correspond broadly to the overseas findings and conform to the anecdotal reported findings about the prevalence of that mode of punishment in the community

The roots of physical punishment

The high prevalence of physical punishment in many societies suggests that it lies embedded in their cultures, and this is the view taken by commentators on the subject. Philip Greven (1991) writing of the US experience, refers to the puritanical preoccupation with discipline and obedience characteristic of the religious movements in 19th century America. It relied on an authoritarian regime by the father, invoking God's word - mainly taken from the old testament which used physical punishment as a quite normal mode against disobedience and other minor misdoings. Approaches to physical punishment were passed on from generation to generation. Greven reminds us that physical punishment has its roots in history and cites John Locke, who in his *Thoughts Concerning Education* 1690, sanctioned physical punishment albeit only 'very rarely' on 'great occasions' recognising that the 'pain of whipping will work but an imperfect care, patches for the present and skins it over but reaches not to the bottom of the sore'. Locke was an advanced thinker who recognised, in an age when severe physical punishment was commonly used, that it was really ineffective for changing the

behaviour of children. Yet even he could not quite rid himself of the notion of its inevitability in extreme cases. Greven also suggests that American society is a very violent one and links this with the attitudes and behaviours in parenting. An indication of the degree to which physical punishment is culturally sanctioned is shown by McCormick (1992) in a large scale study of primary care physicians, (one of the professional groups from whom one might expect something different), where between 63% and 70% supported the use of physical punishment depending on the scenario presented to them by the researcher.

In the UK, Newell (1989) relates the sanctioning of physical punishment with cases from common law. 'The law' he says, 'makes a clear stand against all forms of deliberate assault - except hitting children...the law draws a protective circle not around the child but around the punisher' Although the powers of the courts are likely to be more constrained in upholding parental rights to assault their children since the GILLICK case, in which the House of Lords dismissed the idea of absolute authority of parents over their children until they reach the age of 18, it is not expected that the judiciary will abandon the doctrine that an assault is not an assault when it is physical punishment.

In Australia we have a history of regard and respect for the role of the family to care for and protect its children, and mild physical punishment has been seen as a part of this process. White Australians have formed their culture largely from those of other English speaking countries and European countries and the perceived right of parents to use coercive discipline

was, until recently, unquestioned. Whilst the historical reasons for North American behaviour, as described by Greven, do not apply in Australia, English common law on parental disciplinary rights has certainly been the reference point from which guidance has been taken.

Does physical punishment harm the development of the child?

Physical punishment has been the subject of debate and research for some time now. One of the problems inherent in the question is what kind of physical punishment do we mean. Does the occasional smack cause harm? Probably not in the direct effect it has on the child. But perhaps in the more oblique effects it may well do. Newell devotes a whole chapter to research which argues that using any degree of physical punishment sends the wrong message to the child: namely that conflict has to be resolved in that way; that it is all right for a strong person to hit a weaker one; and that this behaviour can be copied.

Beyond the smack, the more sustained and severe punishments yield more empirically derived information. Norma Fesbach, a child psychologist, is on record as stating that

...studies of child-rearing practices, assessing the effects of parental punishment, especially the use of physical punishment, yield a consistent outcome. In general, the degree of parental punitiveness has been found to be positively correlated with various forms of psychopathology, especially delinquency and acting out behaviour.

Fesbach says that, despite some reservations that have been raised on the issue of causal relationships, eg, do children become delinquent because they are beaten or are they beaten because they are delinquent (Newell, 1989), serious physical punishment, as in child abuse, is also correlated with other forms of family violence (Stanley & Goddard, 1993).

Case studies continue to confirm what observers have claimed for some time: physical punishment is one root of abuse (Haeuser, 1991: EPOCH Worldwide, 1992) and that includes the smack that goes wrong and causes lasting injury or the smack that escalates into a beating because it does not elicit the desired response for the parent. But more generally, observers note that even the lightest form of physical punishment serves as the model of problem solving using interpersonal violence, the gateway into other forms of violence, and all are tributaries that flow into the mainstream of violence of the most severe degrees. Thus we speak of a climate or culture of violence throughout society, person against person, group against group, nation against nation. Although some people have a problem with this kind of linear projection, contending it is too simplistic a proposition, it does merit more attention now than it has so far received.

Steps already taken to stop physical punishment in some countries

Considering that campaigns to abolish physical punishment in the home have only a short history, less than two decades, there are five countries which have already taken the step of abolition, apart from numerous other countries already mentioned, where abolition is under active consideration. The countries which now prohibit physical punishment with the dates of enactment are: Sweden 1979, Finland 1983, Denmark 1985, Norway 1986 and Austria 1989.

All these countries have made changes to their civil laws to achieve the desired results without undue opposition. Most information on how the changes have impacted on society come from Sweden, partly because it was the first country to bring about the change, but it has also caught attention for many years because of the development and

effects of its advanced social welfare and industrial relations systems. Haeuser (1992) who is very familiar with the changes in Sweden, has pointed out that Sweden is a country which moved rapidly in this century from a largely agrarian society to a highly industrialised one; which has shared its gains with its people; and has become a model for social welfare initiatives. This has provided a supportive child rearing environment which, with the general availability of family planning, produced families with only one or two children who, for the most part, are wanted. Despite this, Sweden was also one of the countries that reported a high incidence of child abuse in the 1970s which linked back to the harsh beatings of children in a former era. A connection was made between child abuse and any kind of physical punishment. Educational campaigns and wide publicity led to public acceptance of proposed changes to the law. Since these changes were enacted, the reports indicate that results have been positive, with the use of education campaigns and supportive services networks. Emphasis is placed on verbal resolution of conflicts in families. Haeuser states that:

...the generational transmission of physical punishment as a child rearing method has been broken..., aggression is channelled through physical activity, eg, sports, which teaches physical control.

It is of interest to note that the five countries that have banned physical punishment in the family were also amongst the first to ban it in schools. In this respect Austria dates back to 1870 and Finland to 1890.

The futility of physical punishment and its alternatives

As previously indicated, the empirically based literature shows that young children tend to get smacked quite frequently and there is a general pervasive conformity to the notions that to smack in a mild way is not likely to be harmful. Although as children grow older physical punishment tends to reduce, by this time the simple smack does not suffice. Adolescents tend not to be physically punished which is not surprising, since threatening a hulking teenager could invite unwelcome retaliation.

Proponents of abolition tend to concentrate more on the situation of the young, ie, pre-school age and the junior school age child. The futility of smacking, apart from opposition on intrinsic grounds, may be summed up in the work of Penelope Leach a psychologist who specialises in child development and whose book



Baby and Child is an international best-seller. Leach's main argument is based on rational reasoning that smacking does not achieve its purpose, ie, that of changing the child's behaviour.

Leach argues that families who start smacking babies before they are a year old are just as likely to smack them very frequently when they are four-years-olds as families who don't start smacking until later. In fact, almost all four-year-olds are smacked so smacking babies and toddlers clearly does not produce better behaved pre-school children. Smacking at four doesn't make for better behaved seven-year-olds either. For some, 'ordinary smacking' has clearly not produced behaviour the parents found acceptable because, by their seventh birthday, a quarter of boys and nearly as many girls have been hit with a belt or a strap, a cane or a stick, or with any 'suitable' object that came to hand, such as a slipper or a wooden spoon.

However carefully you tell a child why you are smacking, reason always gets lost in the feelings the punishment produces. A baby or a toddler is as amazed and horrified when a beloved parent smacks, as an adult would be if the family dog suddenly turned around to take a chunk out of that adult's leg.

Smacking and hitting are not based on self evident and immutable principles or values. Because you were so treated as a child and your parents by their parents does not mean that the cycle cannot not be broken

Smacking and its more severe companion, hitting, are damned on the grounds that they are psychologically shocking and humiliating, ineffective and lead to even more undesirable results. Leach, like Greven and other writers, has pointed out that the life histories of notorious individuals, murderers, rapists, muggers and other violent criminals record excessive physical discipline in childhood. Leach has put forward a range of alternatives to smacking, graded according to age and level of understanding of the child. She readily acknowledges that bringing up children requires good discipline and that children learn right from wrong by copying

parents. Parents must keep their children safe and secure - much aggravation can be avoided by 'toddler-proofing' the home; parents should explain their reasons for insisting on certain behaviour; parents should use praise and encouragement and ignore minor silliness and 'cheek' - 'the more you nag the less they'll listen'. Rewards work much better - praise, approval and hugs, as well as tangible things like icecream, lollies and presents - because rewards motivate people and make them want to please.

Smacking and hitting are not based on self evident and immutable principles or values. Because you were so treated as a child and your parents by their parents does not mean that the cycle cannot not be broken - Sweden's experience so far shows that it can.

Opposition to change

Even allowing that the advocates for abolition of physical punishment have a rational case to present, it must not be assumed that this, by itself, would be enough to persuade people in Australia to change both attitudes and behaviour based on values transmitted across the generations. Fear that abandoning physical punishment will breed a nation of wimps; fear of yet more interference by government in the life of the family; fear of a loss of parental authority; a solid belief that in mild form such punishment can do no harm; are some of the more obvious objections that come to mind. All of them can be refuted. If the examples of those countries that have already taken the big step is any guide, a well planned campaign of education: of health and welfare professionals, policy and decision makers and the public at large, spread over some years, will be needed to get to the point where the majority of people accept change. It would still need at least a generation of parenting before mere acceptance turns into whole-hearted belief that smacking, and therefore physical punishment in general, can play no part in the bringing up of children. That seems to have been the experience in Sweden where Haeuser (1992) has noted that:

Today Swedish parents simply assume that not using physical punishment is standard practice. In effect it is now easier for Swedish parents to avoid physical punishment than to defend its use.

There is no reason to think that the Swedish experience is unique. The problem in a country like Australia will lie in breaking through entrenched attitudes and prejudices built up over the generations - fear of losing control over children and subsequent humiliation.

Opposition to change also comes from those who argue that physical punishment is necessary to alleviate the structural deficits in society that cause stress in families: poverty, homelessness unemployment. Newell (1994) has pointed out that there is much wrong with that position. Firstly, it presents a stereotype that disadvantaged parents are particularly prone to hit and humiliate their children, which is not borne out by research. Secondly, it implies that discouraging physical punishment would increase stress rather than reduce it. But most importantly, he says, it ignores the children's rights imperative for acting now:

'why should children wait while we try to create a social utopia...can you imagine a similar excuse for avoiding challenging domestic violence against women....?'

The issue of challenging physical punishment is not in competition with the issue of creating more equitable conditions for all people.

Summary

Physical punishment of children is the latest of the forms of violent interpersonal behaviour to come under scrutiny. The emergence of EPOCH, which represents a campaign to ban physical punishment, is receiving attention across the world. A number of countries are in the process of examining the use and misuse of physical punishment in child rearing and five European countries have already banned it.

In defining physical punishment, account is taken of all ways of hitting a child, starting with the simple smack up to the stage where some instrument is used which can result in serious injury. EPOCH's case is that even the simple smack requires abolition as it can tend to escalate into other more serious forms of hitting, and sends wrong messages to young children who learn early in life that violence is an important means for resolving conflict. Australian laws, whilst suitable to deal with severe types of physical punishment, are generally not applicable to mild forms which do not spell a danger to health or development. Case law suggests that parents may use physical punishment commensurate with a child's age physique and mental development but that for small children only the slightest tap would be permitted.

It is of interest also to note that physical punishment is still allowed in state schools in some parts of Australia.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19.1) requires the child's protection from all forms of physical violence but some ambiguity exists over

absolute prohibition because of the rights of parents to exercise their responsibilities and duties in the bringing up of their children.

Both empirical and anecdotal evidence confirm a wide spread impression that smacking of young children is widely prevalent in developed, industrialised countries, including Australia. Evidence is also available which shows that physical punishment lies embedded in the cultures of these countries. In particular there is consistent evidence from the area of child psychology that the degree of parental punitiveness is positively correlated with various forms of psychopathology especially delinquency and acting out behaviour.

There are five countries in Europe which have already banned physical punishment in the home. Of these, Sweden was the first to take that step in 1979. Reports indicate that good preparation in the form of education campaigns has resulted in a smooth transformation to a no-smacking society.

Whilst proponents of no-smacking can present a rational case for their argument there is a good deal of opposition to change, not least in Australia. It is not only 'red-necks' who do so - even well-disposed people object on the grounds that change means more control and interference in family life and that the mild and occasional smack does not make for lasting harm.

It must be expected that any change that would involve the laws that govern parental behaviour would have to be preceded by a campaign of public education designed to change attitudes to the physical punishment of children. This transformation could take some time to achieve.

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[Peter Newell has a work background in journalism and social issues advocacy. He has been coordinator of EPOCH (UK) since its inception. The book cited above describes that organisation's work and rationale. The model bill proposed to change the law on physical punishment is in Appendix 3]

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Since this article was written, a major new study in this field has been published which draws on additional research and gives further information on legislative and overseas developments. The study, by Judy Cashmore and Nicola de Haas, is titled *Legal and social aspects of the physical punishment of children*. It was commissioned by the Commonwealth Dept. of Human Services and Health under the auspices of the National Child Protection Council.

International Foster Care Conference and International Youth in Care Network Conference

The Biennial International Foster Care Conference was held in Bergen Norway July 24-29 1995. An International Conference of the International Youth in Care Network was held at the same time and there were some useful linkages between the two conferences. Four Australians attended the IFCO conference, Janet Blainey and Lloyd Owen from Victoria, Anne-Louise Nilsson from Queensland and Flora Fairlie from New South Wales.

The Conference theme was Building Bridges and sessions were organised around the bridge to a caring society, the bridge between the two families, the bridge from care needer to caregiver and the bridge to independence. Some emphasis was given to the importance of including the views of children and young people in decision making processes and the important trend of seeing foster care less as substitute care and more as a means of supporting children in a way which enables family problems to be addressed. This will most often mean greater inclusion of the birth parents in the process. This policy shift is reflected in some videos which have been produced by the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria and which were shown at the conference in a workshop session. They triggered lively discussion which acknowledged the difficulties which can arise in this part of bridge building, but also affirmed the importance for the child of actively attending to these birth family /foster family issues.

This theme was also powerfully presented in a series of dramatic skits put on at various points in conference proceedings by the young people from IYICN who were running their own conference parallel to the IFCO conference. As well as poignantly displaying the stresses flowing from shortfalls in parent behaviour, social workers and the system got a humorous but healthy critical serve pointing to the need to attend carefully to detail in the life of the child, and to listen. It is inspiring and exciting to hear the voices of these young people speaking up through the activities of the organisations of children and young people in care, (IYICN, AAYPIC and the rapidly forming State and Territory equivalents in Australia) as is their increasing involvement in the Boards of agencies, in staff selection processes and in policy making.

Also of note were our efforts in the direction of increasing Australian involvement in IFCO and presenting a bid for Australia to host the 1999 Conference. Final decisions are yet to be made, but a case was presented with the support of many agencies, the Government of Victoria and Foster Parent Associations from around Australia. The 1997 IFCO Conference is in Vancouver Canada. The theme of the this conference will be 'Fostering: A Caring Circle'. To join the mailing list write to:

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