

Why do we condone the 'physical punishment' of children?

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Societal tolerance of violence perpetrated between family members is evident in the generally unchallenged views condoning parents' physical assault of children in the name of 'discipline'. The authors suggest that such views reflect society's devaluation of children and a denial of children's basic human rights. This paper addresses the following areas related to the sanctioned physical punishment of children: the 'fuzzy' distinction between physical punishment and physical abuse; the law; the power of words; the media's role and impact; parental explanations and motives for using physical punishment; the effects of physical punishment on children; the alternatives to physical punishment; and the reason this issue is so important, both for children and for society.

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The authority given to parents to physically punish their children remains, largely unchallenged, in our society. Physical punishment, or assault, of children is sanctioned in law and is deemed by many as reasonable both publicly and privately. It is generally regarded as a parent's right. Parents are accorded the discretion to discipline their children as they see fit. Limitations on the means by which parents can physically punish children are imprecise.

Not so long ago married women could be legally beaten by their husbands as long as it was with 'a rod not thicker than his thumb' (Healy, 1984). Throughout history, smaller, weaker and less powerful people have been protected or liberated only when their rights as equal human beings have been asserted and recognized by society in both law and practice. Change is rarely achieved swiftly. Some cherished views held by, and convenient privileges accorded to, the more powerful people in society require gradual erosion.

As small people, babies and children should be entitled to at least the same basic human rights as other people. It is troubling that physical punishment, the disguised assault of children, appears to be either a 'non-issue', an issue 'too hot to handle' (Chappell, 1993, cited in Cashmore & de Haas, 1995: 119) or even a source of humour, as illustrated below.

A society's treatment of children reflects its regard for them. This paper will illustrate that children may be regarded as objects deserving of less respect and of less protection from harm than people. Along with Peter Newell, co-ordinator of EPOCH (an organization set up in the UK to end the physical

punishment of children), the authors of this paper contend that 'hitting people is wrong and children are people too' (Newell, 1989:ix).

In the interest of children, informed public debate, strongly supported by the media, must be encouraged. Importantly, children must be invited to contribute to this debate and their views must be acknowledged. As noted by Minow:

Including children as participants alters their stance in the community, from things or outsiders to members (1990:297, cited in Melton & Limber, 1992:170).

This paper seeks to ignite, and contribute to, informed debate in Australia about the acceptability of physically punishing children and suggests measures required to protect children, to preserve their dignity, and to improve their status in society.

DEFINITIONS OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT, PHYSICAL ABUSE AND THE LAW IN VICTORIA

There seems to be no consensus in our society about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour towards children. In this context, the physical punishment of children is still considered by many to be an acceptable and necessary means of discipline. Comparing a definition of physical abuse with a definition of physical punishment illustrates the tenuous, or non-existent, line between these two acts of aggression.

'Physical punishment' has been defined as:

...any punishment...intended to cause [physical] 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... (EPOCH, Worldwide, 1992: cited in Boss, 1995:27)

In comparison, rather than in contrast, **'physical abuse'** has been defined as:

...the point at which...societies...draw a line (often legally), and includes such visible injuries as bruises, cuts, burns or broken bones. (Whipple & Richey, 1997:434)

By sanctioning the physical punishment of children, the law: 'transforms an act that would otherwise be a crime (a physical attack on another human person) into legal and morally correct behaviour'. (Straus, 1994:8)

The law in Victoria, for example, affords a parent or guardian:

...the right to administer reasonable corporal punishment. It cannot be without a just cause or *excuse* and must not be excessive. In determining what is reasonable consideration must be given to the age, physique and mentality of the child as well as to the means or **instrument** used. (*The Law Handbook, Victoria*, 1995: 326, *emphases added*)

Clearly, the law assumes that parents will discipline their children with forethought and self control. Research suggests that this assumption is, in many instances, unfounded. Physical punishment will rarely, if ever, be administered by a calm, child-focused individual. It is perhaps more likely that a parent will physically punish a child as a reflexive action or as a result of pent-up frustrations, fear or anger (Gough & Reavey, 1997; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger & Chyi-lin, 1991). Many children have been seriously injured, or even killed, in the name of discipline (Korbin, 1989; Wilczynski, 1995; 1997).

A man who beats his wife may be charged with assault. A teenager who strikes his father may be charged with assault. But a father who beats his child with an implement leaving extensive bruising has a defence – he has the right to administer punishment.

HOW PREVALENT IS PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT?

Christopher Green, the well-known author of *Toddler Taming*, suggests that:

... as soon as that negative, stubborn, self-centred terrorist toddler appears, many [parents] wonder what has hit them. (Green, 1984:45)

Statistics and observation suggest, however, that it is the vulnerable and naturally adventurous toddler who is perplexed and distressed at being hit. The physical punishment of children is widely practised in advanced industrial societies.

Research indicates that it is not only toddlers who are hit. Some parents continue to assault their 15 to 17 year old children and many babies have been hit before their first birthday (Straus, 1994; Smith, 1995). Surveys in Britain have revealed that two-thirds of a large sample of mothers said they had 'smacked' their babies, almost a quarter of seven year olds had already been hit with an implement, and 53% of children had been threatened with an implement (Newell, 1994). Daily 'spanking', Straus (1994) suggests, is common in the US, where one study revealed that 89% of parents had hit their three year old children. In Australia, one study revealed that 94% of children aged between four and 14 said they had been 'smacked' and 36% had been hit with an implement. Ninety-seven per cent of parents reported being smacked as a child (Duke & Aitchison, 1992).

These figures are probably only the tip of the iceberg. The exact nature and extent of physical punishment, particularly of very young children, is difficult if not impossible for researchers to accurately ascertain. Parents may underestimate, or publicly conceal, their use of physical punishment, especially if they feel guilty or concerned about their behaviour towards their children and if they are not familiar with other effective alternatives. This may not dissuade them, however, from continually justifying their behaviour both to themselves and to others (see below).

THE POWER OF WORDS

Many, if not most, parents have been both 'victims' and 'perpetrators' of parental violence toward children. Even the deliberate choice of the words 'victims', 'perpetrators' and 'violence' may have already produced an uncomfortable reaction in many readers.

The literature on physical punishment and surveys abound with euphemisms such as 'smacking', 'spanking', 'chastisement' and 'corporal punishment'. Many of these euphemisms are peculiar to this treatment of children. These words serve only to justify or condone hitting, beating or otherwise causing children pain or distress.

Children may be described as recipients of 'reasonable chastisement' as discipline, whereas adults similarly assaulted are victims of crime. The judicial response to 'over-chastisement' often reflects this unjust distinction. It seems 'the smaller the victim the lesser the crime' (Goddard, 1994).

Justification is absent from the term 'physical abuse'. By definition, 'abuse' is an 'unjust and corrupt practice'. Similarly, the words 'violence' and 'assault' aptly describe unlawful, irresponsible acts which are unacceptable in humane, civilized societies. These words, however, are not characteristically chosen to describe the deliberate infliction of pain, and sometimes even injury, on a child by a parent. Graziano and Namaste have noted that:

With the exception of warfare, self-defence, and the often necessary use of physical force by the police, no human interactions other than adult – child interactions carry such clear social supports for the unilateral use of physical punishment by one party to another (1990: 450).

Language is powerful in maintaining society's acceptance of the physical punishment of children. Language also has the potential to be powerful in changing attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. Garbarino advocates the need to:

...push against the use of language that describes physical punishment as something other than it is...Let's simply talk about the use of 'assault against

children as punishment'... 'assault as discipline'... disorient people, jar them out of the comfort of terms such as 'a good licking'... Let's make people come right out and say 'I favour assaulting children - for their own good of course' (1996:159).

THE POWER OF WORDS AND THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

The media is a very powerful force in informing the public and promoting enlightened debate. Indeed, Goddard (1998) suggests that 'the media have a greater influence over child protection policies than professionals do'. In relation to the physical punishment of children, however, the media's record in Australia (compared to the UK, for example) has been disappointing. In both countries the media's response may have served to trivialize a serious problem. Rather than using the power of words to promote the rights of children, the issue of physical punishment has been regarded as a source of humour.

Use of, and puns on, euphemisms for assaults on children are frequently used in the media when physical punishment is considered newsworthy. The choice of these words casts doubt on the media's awareness of the possible detrimental effects of physical punishment on children (and later on adolescents and adults). It also suggests that the media is complacent about the contribution which sanctioned physical punishment makes to maintaining children's current low status in our society. Some headlines and comments in articles related to physical punishment suggest that objections to this treatment of children are treated humourously, if not as absurd. The following headlines above articles on the physical punishment of children are notable:

'No fair cracks of the whip' (Bone, *The Age*, 23/6/95)

'Spanking plans smack of folly' (Dusevic, *The Australian*, 20/6/95)

'Hitting back at Smackers' (*The Times*, 18/3/94)

'UN slaps Australia over child discipline' (Farouque, *The Age*, 22/6/94)

'Critics give Denmark's smacking ban a wallop' (Knowsley, *The Age*, 2/6/97)

'Parents who hit given a scolding' (Gray, *The Sunday Age*, 17/8/97)

'UN go to bat for our kids' (Loane, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8/10/97)

'A smack for smacking' (Editorial Opinion, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2/5/95)

'Punishment ban smacks of good sense' (Horin, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5/6/95)



Journalists may play a major role in constructing what is 'deviant' in our society and thus what is not 'deviant' but 'normal' (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). The physical punishment of children currently seems to be portrayed in the media as 'normal' and it is this unquestioning tolerance of assaults on children which is of particular concern to the authors. What is and what is not acceptable behaviour towards children remains a matter of contention in our society but it has rarely been the subject of serious debate in the media. Further, the thoughts of children in relation to this issue are rarely sought and recorded.

Violence directed at children is a serious issue. Children have a right to

physical integrity. By treating this issue so frivolously, the sub-editors of leading Australian and overseas newspapers contribute to denying children the dignity to which they are entitled.

WHAT ARE THE MOTIVATIONS AND RATIONALES FOR THE PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN?

Parents can call on many authorities from God to Christopher Green to back up their beliefs in physical punishment (Horin, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1995b:11)

At least four explanations or motives for the use of physical punishment have been identified in the literature.

1. Duty and pedagogy

'You must never hit people' chants father as he spansks his son. (Leach, 1994:130, cited in Gough & Reavey, 1997)

Physical punishment of children may be perceived as an aid to a duty. This duty is bestowed on parents, either by God or by society, to teach their children correct, or acceptable, behaviour as opposed to behaviour that is deviant or inappropriate. The adage 'spare the rod and spoil the child' supports this explanation. Implied in this rationale is an entrenched belief system. Punishment ought to be carefully considered and administered in a determined manner (Baumrind, 1996). The child is to be taught a 'lesson', one that will be remembered. Moral arguments, and arguments based on the efficacy of physical punishment abound: physical punishment is 'toughening and character building... the world is cruel, learn consequences early' (Wissow, 1996:815). Moreover, it is effective because young children, some argue (Ginn, 1996), do not respond to verbal reasoning and dangerous misbehaviour must be stopped quickly (Wissow, 1996).

2. Need, catharsis and self-fulfillment

Aggressive physical punishment of children is often more a function of the parent's emotional state than a function

of the child's behaviour (Cohen, 1996). An inconvenienced, unprepared, tired or frustrated parent may have low levels of tolerance of 'normal' childhood behaviours. Children may be punished for crying, spilling food or drink, toileting accidents, or waking up at night. They may be punished for childish provocation which on other occasions might be tolerated or responded to in a more appropriate manner. Parents may administer physical punishment to relieve stress and regain control (Leach, 1994, cited in Gough & Reavey, 1997). They may be motivated by a strong parental desire for children either to be like them (Gosciewski, 1976, cited in Gough & Reavey, 1997), to fulfil parental expectations (Rosenberg & Reppucci, 1983; Browne, 1995) or to fulfill unmet parental ambitions.

3. Social learning and intergenerational transmission

People who have been physically punished as children may be more inclined than other people to physically punish their own children (Graziano, Linquist, Kuncie & Munjal, 1992; Straus, 1994). A common adult response to the experience of physical punishment as a child is 'it never did me any harm'. Moreover, many adults recall that as children they believed, and indeed they often continue to believe, that the pain and emotional trauma they experienced as a result of physical punishment by their parents was deserved. Thus, physical punishment was and is deemed appropriate and acceptable (Bower & Knutson, 1996). Adult victims of child sexual abuse also recall their feelings of self-blame (Pease & Goddard, 1996).

4. Temperamental disposition

Some research suggests that harsh parental discipline may lead to a hostile personality in the victim who, as a result, will behave aggressively both to his or her own children and to people in general (Simons et al., 1991). This predisposition toward aggressive behaviour may be learned, through observation and imitation, or it may be an inherited trait (Report of the Gulbenkian Foundation Commission, 1995). An aggressive personality may be tempered or stimulated by factors in one's environment. Aggressive or

challenging children may receive more frequent and more severe physical punishment.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT?

It is difficult to separate the impact of other factors, or combinations of factors, in the child's relationships and environment from the impact of physical punishment. Other factors may include minimal or no parental warmth, poor parent-child attachment, hostile parenting and inconsistent child management and monitoring (Cohen, 1996; Bauman, 1996). It has been suggested that adverse effects may result from physical punishment alone, from a negative attitude to the child, or the combination of both (Socolar & Stein, 1995). Others have argued that it is the primary reliance on physical punishment as a means of discipline which may be detrimental to a child's development and later adult functioning (Power & Chapieski, 1986).

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Straus (1994) notes that individual research studies are not conclusive about the detrimental effects of physical punishment. However, cumulative evidence suggests that physical punishment may (at least in part) be responsible for depression and suicide, violence and crime, masochistic sexual relationships, alienation, reduced income and physical abuse (Straus, 1994).

Children's experiences of physical punishment will vary in degrees of severity and regularity. However, even the occasional 'light smack or tap on the hand or bottom' (Goddard, 1996) may be the child's first lessons that hitting is an acceptable means to

achieve ends or to resolve conflict. Children may feel hurt, resentful, hateful and humiliated. They may feel angry, anxious and fearful (Maxwell, 1993; Graziano, Hamblen & Plante, 1996). They may also feel varying degrees of physical pain. Children's rights to physical integrity are ignored and children's powerlessness and vulnerability are reinforced.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AND WHAT IN ADDITION TO DEBATE IS NEEDED?

'It seems likely', wrote Wiggin in 1892:19, hopefully with great foresight, 'that the rod of reason will have to replace the rod of birch' (cited in Freeman, 1993:38).

Most parents receive minimal, if any, formal education related to parenting. Moreover, in Australia, the benefits of universal services for children and their families are increasingly being questioned. 'All services to all children appear to be regarded as a cost rather than an investment' (Goddard, 1996).

This is not the case in Sweden, where physical punishment has been banned since 1979. Parent education and recognition of the difficulties of parenting were significant in the implementation of the ban and there is almost universal utilization of well staffed maternal and child health services (Haeuser, internet reference).

In Australia, many parents who would rather not use physical punishment may have limited knowledge of alternatives (Wightman, 1993, cited in Cashmore & de Haas, 1995). Children, **when consulted**, have expressed a preference for discussion, time-out and the withdrawal of privileges (Carlson, 1986; 1991).

There have been moves in some countries such as Scotland to place limitations on the means used to physically punish children. It has been argued that an emphatic message must be given that using implements such as belts and sticks to hit children is completely wrong. Moreover, a major education campaign is required to explain the damage that may be done to children by blows to the head and other vulnerable parts of the body (Goddard, 1996).

While such measures are imperative, an equally important message must be given that hitting children is as completely wrong as hitting adults, irrespective of the weapon used or physical injury incurred. The physical safety of a child is jeopardized whenever an adult strikes him or her. Blows may be misplaced or an adult's strength may be underestimated, particularly in the heat of the moment. Intentions may have little impact on physical injury or emotional harm.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE SO IMPORTANT?

At least four events have occurred in Australia in this decade which had the potential to improve the status and respect afforded to our children:

1. In 1990, Australia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 19 (1) and Article 37 of the Convention condemn the physical punishment of children.
2. In 1995, a discussion paper commissioned by the Australian Government, *Legal and Social Aspects of the Physical Punishment of Children* (Cashmore & de Haas, 1995), called for informed discussion and public debate about the acceptability of physically punishing children. This appears to have been largely ignored.
3. In 1997, Australia received a strong rebuke from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding its treatment of children. At least two questions of particular relevance to this issue were raised. Why doesn't Australia have a National Commissioner for Children who would promote and protect the rights of Australian children? And, why do our laws still allow the physical punishment of children?
4. Soon after, an inquiry into our legal and child protection systems, promisingly entitled, *'Seen and Heard': Priority for Children in the Legal Process* (1997), proposed that children should have the same protection from assault as adults but recommended the banning of physical punishment **only** in schools.

Children continue to be the only people against whom violence is considered to be acceptable. Children may be physically punished rarely or often,

swiftly or after an agonizing delay. The effects of physical punishment on children may be short-lived or long-term. The pain and emotional trauma suffered by children warrants further attention, accompanied by decisive action. Its dismissal to the realm of parents' rights needs to be continually challenged, both publicly and privately.

We contend that the physical punishment of children is always abusive and an infringement of children's rights. Some argue further that mild physical punishment may exist on a continuum escalating to severe or even fatal abuse (Boss, 1994; Browne, 1995; Garbarino, 1996; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997).

Media coverage of severe family violence and child fatalities has had a significant impact on the public's awareness of child abuse and of our system of child protection. A lack of media interest in the physical punishment of children, despite this possible link, has meant that the media has not seriously addressed the issues of children's rights to physical integrity and children's inadequate protection from harm. We believe it is paramount that the media redress this oversight by responsibly leading public debate. Importantly, the views of children must be sought and acknowledged.

The difficulties of parenting and, particularly, the difficulties faced by single parents, parents who are socially and economically disadvantaged, and parents of children suffering from physical or emotional problems must be acknowledged. In recognition of the difficulties faced by all parents, debate about the physical punishment of children must be combined with unrelenting pressure on governments to acknowledge the importance of children. Such acknowledgement would result in decisive measures to protect children, to preserve their dignity, and to improve their status in society. Children's rights to physical integrity and to participation in society must be recognized in the form of primary prevention programs, which provide social and educational support to parents, and by the appointment of State and Federal Children's Commissioners through whom children can be ensured a voice.

To conclude, we pose the following questions for discussion:

- Why does the physical punishment of children by parents continue to be sanctioned?
- What is appropriate, effective and morally acceptable discipline for children?
- Who benefits from physical punishment?
- Is the physical punishment of children abusive?
- Why isn't the physical punishment of children by parents treated as a serious issue?

'Much violence is learned at home. Home, therefore, is surely where we should begin to arrest the process'. (Goddard, 1994:12) □

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