

'Help, not punishment': Moving on from physical punishment of children

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Although the physical punishment of children is overall an ineffective disciplining strategy, has adverse long-term psychological effects, and carries the risk of physical punishment escalating into child abuse, parental physical punishment is lawful in all Australian states and territories within the bounds of lawful correction or reasonable chastisement. What is considered to be reasonable is open to considerable interpretation, which further increases the risk of physical harm to children. Physical punishment of children also contravenes the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which Australia has ratified. Although more effective disciplining strategies, such as cognitive-behavioural parenting strategies, are available and have been advocated by professional organisations, the vast majority of Australian parents condone parental physical punishment of children and are opposed to its prohibition. Predictors for this stance include perceived social norms, the belief that physically punishing children is an effective disciplining strategy and a parent's right, a perceived absence of alternative parenting strategies, and fear of prosecution if physical punishment were to be banned. Countries that have phased out the physical punishment of children have demonstrated that, to encourage a shift in parental attitudes and behaviours, public awareness about the detrimental effects of physical punishment and the effectiveness of alternative disciplining strategies needs to be raised. Additionally, parents require support through free and convenient access to evidence-based parenting programmes that promote alternative disciplining strategies; and the defence of lawful correction needs to be repealed, with the aim of setting a new standard, as well as education rather than prosecution.

■ **Keywords:** corporal punishment, physical punishment, parenting programs, child discipline

Introduction

Physical punishment of children by their parents remains a contentious issue in many parts of the community, including parents, psychologists, medical and legal practitioners, and policy makers. Physical punishment is 'the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience bodily pain or discomfort so as to correct or punish the child's behavior' (Gershoff, 2008, p. 9). This includes hitting, slapping, smacking and spanking a child (Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS), 2014; Holzer & Lamont, 2010). Those in favour of physical punishment of children maintain that it is an effective and harmless strategy to immediately stop children's aggressive behaviours (Baumrind, 2008; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). Opponents of physical punishment argue that physical punishment carries the risk of inflicting physical and psychological harm on children, and that it models aggressive responses to conflict (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Australian

Psychological Society (APS), 2014; Oates, 2010). Moreover, non-physical disciplining strategies, particularly cognitive-behavioural strategies, are as effective in obtaining immediate compliance and more effective in achieving lasting behaviour change (Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Furlong et al., 2012; Gershoff, 2010, 2013).

Australian state and territory legislation or common law distinguish between child physical abuse, which is prohibited, and parental physical punishment, which is permitted as a parental disciplinary measure as long as 'reasonable' force is used for the purpose of *lawful correction* or *reasonable chastisement* (Alexander, Naylor, & Saunders, 2011; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014). Whereas some believe that the defence of lawful correction does not interfere with protecting children from excessive physical

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punishment (New South Wales Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010), others argue that what constitutes reasonable physical punishment is ill-defined and that this lack of definition creates a grey area that leaves children vulnerable to physical abuse (Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Paediatric & Child Health Division (RACP), 2013; Saunders, 2013; Tucci, Mitchell, & Goddard, 2006). The majority of Australian parents condone and engage in physical punishment, and view physically punishing their children as their right (Godfrey, 2011; Tucci et al., 2006). In contrast, a growing number of Australian professional organisations (APS, 2014; RACP, 2013) agree with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2011), that permitting physical punishment of children not only carries a multitude of risks but also violates ‘the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence’ (CRC, 2011, p. 1).

To encourage a shift in parental attitudes towards physical punishment of children, it is important to understand why parents continue to condone parental corporal punishment. Common reasons relate to perceived social norms, the belief that physical punishment is an effective and harmless parenting strategy and a parent’s right, fear of prosecution if parental physical punishment were to be banned, and a perceived absence of alternative parenting strategies (Bell & Romano, 2012; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011). To address these concerns, a public health approach to raising awareness and to educating and supporting parents is required (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2010; CRC, 2012; RACP, 2013). Awareness campaigns need to include information about the detrimental effects of physical punishment on children, and information about the effectiveness of alternative disciplining strategies. In addition, parents need to be supported on a practical level by having free and convenient access to evidence-based parenting programmes, such as cognitive-behavioural programmes, which promote alternative disciplining strategies. In order to send a clear message that is consistent with awareness and education campaigns, government leadership is required (Oates, 2010; Reddington, 2002). In line with CRC recommendations, and with a view to educate rather than prosecute parents, the defence of lawful correction needs to be repealed (CCCH, 2010; CRC, 2012; Oates, 2010; RACP, 2013). As the countries that have led the way in phasing out parental physical punishment of children have shown, law reform is an integral part of the change process (Global Initiative to End All Punishment of Children (GITEACPOC), 2009a; Modig, 2014).

Prevalence of Physical Punishment and Parental Attitudes in Australia

In 2006, 69% of Australian parents found it necessary to physically punish their children, 45% believed it to be reasonable to leave a mark on their child as a result of physical

punishment, 10% believed that using a cane or belt was a reasonable method of punishment, and 41% thought that physical punishment was an effective parenting strategy to shape a child’s behaviour (Tucci et al., 2006). While the number of parents who support the use of physical punishment to discipline children decreased from 75% in 2002 to 69% in 2006 (Tucci et al., 2006; Tucci, Saunders, & Goddard, 2002), results from a more recent survey of more than 4000 parents suggest that the percentage of parents who physically punish their children has increased to 85% (Godfrey, 2011). In the same survey, 8% of parents reported regretting the use of physical punishment to discipline their children (Godfrey, 2011).

A number of factors can contribute to parents condoning or using physical punishment: (1) lack of knowledge about child developmental stages (expecting behaviour from children that is beyond their ability and misattribution of intent); (2) the belief that physical punishment will teach the child a lesson; (3) obtaining immediate compliance; (4) the belief that physical punishment is an effective parenting strategy that teaches the child discipline and self-regulation; (5) the belief that ‘mild’ physical punishment is harmless or that parental warmth mitigates potential negative outcomes; (6) a personal history of physical punishment and the belief that it was harmless (‘it didn’t do me any harm’); (7) parental negative affect, such as depression; (8) parental stress and anger related to the child’s behaviour or to the parent’s circumstances; (9) the belief that parents own their children and have the right to physically punish their child; (10) perceived approval of physical punishment by professionals, family and friends; and (11) a perceived lack of alternative disciplinary methods (Alexander et al., 2011; Alizadeh, Applequist, & Coolidge, 2007; Ateah & Durrant, 2005; Bell & Romano, 2012; Gagne, Tourigny, & Pouliot-Lapointe, 2007; Gershoff, 2010; GITEACPOC, 2008; Goddard & Saunders, 1998; Saunders, 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). It appears that many factors contributing to parents physically punishing their children are related to social norms, parents’ mistaken beliefs, lack of knowledge and lack of emotion regulation.

An additional factor that may be contributing to the perpetuation of the belief that physical punishment is harmless is the use of minimising language, such as smacking or spanking, to describe the physical punishment of children (Saunders, 2013; Saunders & Goddard, 2008). Smacking, for example, is generally considered to be mild physical punishment and considered to be harmless by most parents (AIFS, 2014; Keene, 2012). However, a smack is defined as ‘a sharp slap or blow, typically given with the palm of the hand’ (Anon., 2014), and slapping is included in behaviours describing physical punishment as well as child physical abuse (AIFS, 2012, 2014). The use of terms such as smacking and spanking masks that the behaviour directed towards children is slapping, and this minimising makes the behaviour sound less harmful and more acceptable (Goddard & Saunders, 1998; Saunders, 2013).

Effective Parenting Strategies

Those in favour of physical punishment argue that it achieves immediate compliance and, hence, is helpful in stopping children's aggressive behaviours quickly (Larzelere, Cox, & Smith, 2010; Larzelere & Kuhn, 2005). There is little disagreement that physical discipline is associated with immediate compliance; however, detrimental long-term effects outweigh these short-term gains (Gershoff, 2010, 2013). A substantial body of evidence suggests that physical punishment, and the anxiety associated with it, interfere with the learning process and lead to the child repeating the undesired behaviours (Gershoff, 2010, 2013; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean, & Sameroff, 2012). Results from Gershoff's (2002) meta-analysis investigating the effects of physical punishment on child behaviour indicate that even mild physical punishment leads to a decline in the quality of the parent-child relationship and a reduction in the moral internalisation of the message and, hence, a decline in the learning of internal control of behaviour by the child (APS, 2014; Gershoff et al., 2012). Given this, it is not surprising that physical punishment has been shown to increase aggressive behaviours in children in the long term (Odgers et al., 2008; Scott, Doolan, Beckett, & Harry, 2011; Straus, 2005).

Larzelere and colleagues (2010), on the other hand, suggest that not only physical punishment but also non-corporal disciplining strategies increase children's aggressive behaviour, showing that mild physical punishment and grounding, if used twice per week, similarly increase children's aggressive behaviour. However, results from the same study also indicate that, when physical punishment or grounding were used three times per week, aggressive behaviour further increased for children who were physically punished and decreased for children who were grounded (Larzelere et al., 2010). Arguably, parents may not limit mild physical punishment of children to twice per week and, hence, it appears that physical punishment is more likely to increase aggressive behaviour in children than grounding would. Larzelere and colleagues (2010) further suggest that adverse effects on aggressive behaviour were related to already existing externalising behaviours. Contrary to these findings, Taylor, Manganello, Lee and Rice (2010) showed that mild but frequent physical punishment (three times or more in one month) at age 3 was associated with an increase in aggressive child behaviour at age 5 that was above levels reported at age 3 (Taylor et al., 2010). Similar results were obtained by Lee, Altschul and Gershoff (2013) who showed that mild physical punishment of children aged 1-3 increased their aggressive behaviour at age 3-5 above initial levels (Lee et al., 2013). Results from the same study also suggest that maternal warmth does not mitigate an increase in aggressive child behaviour (Lee et al., 2013).

On balance, it seems that any short-term gains in reducing aggressive behaviour in children are outweighed by the risk of exacerbating this behaviour in the long term.

Furthermore, given that not only a short-term reduction in aggressive behaviour, but also an increase in learning new adaptive behaviours and long-term behaviour change, are goals of child discipline, it seems that the physical punishment of children is, overall, ineffective as a disciplining strategy (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), 2012; AIFS, 2014; APS, 2014; Holzer & Lamont, 2010; Tully, 2008). Discipline is an integral part of parenting (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2009; Tully, 2008). However, as the RACP (2013) suggests in their recent position statement, 'physical punishment is an out-dated practice' (p. 2), 'there are much more effective and positive ways to provide discipline' (p. 2).

A large body of evidence indicates that cognitive-behavioural parenting strategies are effective at reducing aggressive child behaviours, both in the short term and long term, without the associated risks of increasing such behaviours in the long term (AACAP, 2012; Anoula & Nurmi, 2005; CDC, 2009; Furlong et al., 2012; Gershoff, 2013; Tully, 2008; Wade, Macvean, Falkiner, Devine, & Milton, 2012). Accordingly, the use of cognitive-behavioural parenting strategies, as opposed to physical punishment, to discipline children is advocated by an increasing number of Australian government and professional organisations, including the Australian Institute for Family Studies (2014), the Australian Parenting Research Centre (Wade et al., 2012), the Australian Psychological Society (2014), the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Paediatric and Child Health Division (2013), and the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital (2010).

Psychological Risks

Proponents of physical punishment maintain that mild physical punishment does not negatively affect children's psychological development (Baumrind, 2008). Baumrind (2001) reports a strong correlation between severe punishment and long-term psychological harm to children, but only a small correlation between mild punishment and adverse psychological effects on children. In contrast, other findings indicate that physical punishment is associated with an increase in anxiety, depression, substance use and personality disorders (Afifi et al., 2012; Lansford et al., 2005; Leach, 2002). Further possible negative effects are an increase in child and adult antisocial behaviour, and adult abusive behaviour (Gershoff, 2010; Leach, 2002). Children who experience physical punishment from their parents are more likely to hit peers and siblings, and later in life are more likely to hit their spouses (Lansford et al., 2005; Straus, 2005). These effects are thought to be the result of parents modelling to children that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict (Gershoff, 2010; Linke, 2002; Oates, 2010). This way, physical punishment of children contributes to an intergenerational cycle of violence, where parents' own experiences of physical punishment are

associated with parents physically punishing their children (AACAP, 2012; Trunk, 2010). In addition, Straus (2008) reported a correlation between physical punishment of children and sexual behaviour problems, such as sexual coercion and risky sexual practices, displayed by these children as young adults (Straus, 2008). Finally, physical punishment has been associated with a decrease in children's academic performance (Straus & Paschall, 2009).

Ferguson (2013) cautions that conclusions about long-term adverse psychological effects of physical punishment are being drawn based on limiting methodologies and statistical procedures. Nevertheless, there seems to be little evidence suggesting that physical punishment of children has no adverse effect on children's psychological development, and there appears to be no evidence showing that physical punishment has positive effects on children's psychological development (AIFS, 2014). In contrast, evaluations of cognitive-behavioural parenting programmes have shown that cognitive-behavioural strategies are not associated with adverse psychological outcomes (APS, 2014; CDC, 2009; Furlong, et al., 2012; Wade et al., 2012). Instead, cognitive-behavioural programmes, such as Triple-P (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), 2014a; Sanders, 1999), 1–2–3 Magic (CEBC, 2014b; Phelan, 2014) and Incredible Years (CEBC, 2014c; Webster-Stratton, 1984), have been shown to promote psychological wellbeing through the development of emotion self-regulation in parents and children, and the learning of non-aggressive responses to conflict (CDC, 2009; Sanders & Mazzuchelli, 2013; Tully, 2008).

Physical Risks

Another potential risk associated with physical punishment is child physical abuse. In Gershoff's (2002) meta-analysis of 88 corporal punishment studies, one of the two largest reported effect sizes relates to the association between an increase in parental physical punishment and an increase in parental physical abuse of the child. These results indicate that physical punishment frequently escalates into child physical abuse. Gershoff's (2002) findings are supported by Zolotor, Theodore, Chang, Berkoff and Runyan (2008), who reported that mothers who used physical punishment to discipline their child were 2.7 times more likely to physically abuse their child than mothers who did not use physical punishment. These findings are not surprising, given the ineffectiveness of physical punishment in shaping children's behaviour in the long term (Gershoff, 2002, 2010). Following physical punishment, a child's aggressive behaviour is likely to increase, which can prompt parents to increase the intensity of physical punishment in order to achieve compliance, and this can result in a downward spiral of the parent losing control and physically abusing the child (Oates, 2010; Saunders & Goddard, 2008; Straus, 2005).

Injuries inflicted on children that were reported as a result of escalated physical punishment include ruptured

eardrums, broken jaws and brain damage (GITEACPOC, 2013; Saunders & Goddard, 2008). The majority of child physical abuse cases reported by paediatricians are thought to be the result of parental loss of control when physically punishing their children (RACP, 2013); three-quarters of substantiated child physical abuse cases are associated with excessive physical punishment (Durrant et al., 2006); and escalation of physical punishment is commonly given as a reason for child homicide (Cavanagh & Dobash, 2007). In New South Wales (NSW) alone, 59 children died between 1991 and 2005 as a result of an escalation of physical punishment (Nielssen, Large, Westmore, & Lackersteen, 2009). The potential for escalation, when parents lose control while physically punishing their children, clearly poses a risk of physical harm to children (GITEACPOC, 2013; RACP, 2013; Saunders & Goddard, 2008). This risk is substantially reduced when the physical punishment of children is no longer an accepted social norm and when this change in attitude is reflected in the law (Oates, 2010; Saunders, 2013; Smith, 2012).

Findings by Bussmann, Erthal and Schroth (2010) suggest that prohibition of physical punishment of children does not stop escalation of parental physical punishment altogether, but that it is associated with a substantial reduction in physical punishment of children, particularly severe physical punishment. Evaluating 2007 data from five European countries, Bussmann et al. (2010) observed that, in Sweden, where corporal punishment of children was prohibited in 1979, only 4% of parents hit their child's face; in Germany (prohibition in 2000), 13% of parents hit their child's face; in Austria 18% (prohibition in 1989); and in France and Spain (no prohibition or very recent prohibition), 32% of parents hit their child's face. In addition, Trunk (2010) showed that, in those five countries, parents' awareness of prohibition of physical punishment correlated negatively with parents' advocacy of physical punishment as well as parents' use of severe physical punishment in those countries at the time (Trunk, 2010). These results indicate that prohibition of physical punishment is an important factor in reducing the risk of physical harm to children through escalated physical punishment.

The Defence of Lawful Correction

Child physical abuse is defined as 'the non-accidental use of physical force against a child that results in harm to the child' (AIFS, 2012, para. 5). Behaviours that constitute child physical abuse include 'shoving, hitting, slapping, shaking, throwing, and punching' children (AIFS, 2012, para. 5; Australian Childhood Foundation, 2009). Physical abuse of children is prohibited in all Australian states and territories through criminal law, family law and child protection legislation (Alexander et al., 2011; Australian Government, Australian Law Reform Commission, 2010).

Physical punishment is the 'physical force towards a child for the purpose of control and/or correction, and as a

disciplinary penalty inflicted on the body with the intention of causing some degree of discomfort, however mild' (AIFS, 2014, para. 3). This can include 'hitting, smacking, spanking, (. . .) kicking' (AIFS, 2014, para. 3). It can also include the use of objects to physically punish children, such as a belt, stick, wooden spoon or shoe (AIFS, 2014; Holzer & Lamont, 2010; Saunders & Goddard, 2008). Whereas these behaviours are viewed as assault when directed at adults, the defence of lawful correction makes it lawful for parents in all Australian states and territories to direct these behaviours at their children for the purpose of discipline (AIFS, 2014; Saunders, 2013). In NSW, for example, 'Section 61AA of the Crimes Act 1900 provides a legal defence of lawful correction to what would normally constitute an assault' (New South Wales Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010, p. 12). As Saunders (2013) suggests, the defence of lawful correction appears to be akin to a 'lawful excuse' (p. 295).

For physical punishment to be regarded as lawful correction, parents in all states and territories are required to use 'reasonable force', and to consider the child's age and reasoning capacity, the method of punishment and the harm inflicted on the child (AIFS, 2014; Holzer & Lamont, 2010). Only New South Wales has attempted to clarify the term reasonable, in order to 'limit the use of excessive force to punish children' (Crimes Amendment Act 2001, New South Wales Government, 2001, p. 1). The Act states that it is not considered reasonable for force to be applied to '(a) any part of the neck or head of the child, or (b) to any other part of the body in such a way as to be likely to cause harm to the child that lasts more than a short period' (New South Wales Government, 2001, p. 3). Based on recommendations made by the Model Criminal Code Officers Committee (1998), the Crimes Amendment Bill (2000) had proposed that force 'applied by the use of a stick, belt or other object' (New South Wales Parliamentary Research Service, 2000, p. 25) would also be regarded as unreasonable. However, this recommendation was not included in the Act and the Act was consolidated into the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) as Section 61AA (Section 61AA, Crimes Act 1900 (NSW), 2001). Ten years later, in preparation for a review of Section 61AA of the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW), several submissions were made suggesting amendments, including a submission by the Department of Corrective Services to legislate that the use of implements and a closed fist be regarded as unreasonable force. Despite these submissions, the Statutory Review of Section 61AA (2010) concluded that additional limitations to what would be considered unreasonable force were not necessary and that Section 61AA, Crimes Act 1900 (New South Wales Government 2001) had achieved the objective of establishing 'a reasonable community standard that people can understand' (New South Wales Department of Justice and Attorney General, 2010, p. 15). A different view has been put forward by Saunders (2013) who argues that the definition of unreasonable physical punishment leaves much open to interpretation by failing to de-

fine what constitutes a 'short period' and 'harm' (Saunders, 2013).

Interpretations of what is reasonable physical punishment vary widely. Is it reasonable, for example, to leave a mark on a child as a result of physical punishment? A survey of 60 lawyers by Alexander et al. (2011) revealed that over 90% had been involved in family law proceedings where lawyers had referred to physical discipline that left marks on a child (among other possible consequences) as child abuse. The lawyers also reported that judges were less likely to refer to leaving a mark on a child as child abuse (Alexander et al., 2011). Results from a nationwide phone survey about parental use of physical punishment revealed that 45% of Australian parents believed it to be reasonable to leave a mark on a child as a result of physical punishment (Tucci et al., 2006). The Australian Institute for Family Studies (2014) states that physical punishment resulting in 'bruising, marking or other injury lasting longer than a 24-hour period may be deemed unreasonable and thus classified as physical abuse' (para. 5). Such an interpretation was not supported by a Queensland judge in 2000, who interpreted the serious bruising of a 9-year-old child as a result of beatings with a tree branch as reasonable because the type of punishment was common when the child's mother was a child (Reddington, 2002). Not surprisingly, Alexander et al. (2011) found that more than half of the lawyers surveyed did not believe that the law in their state was sufficiently clear to distinguish between physical discipline and child abuse. It appears that the lack of clear definitions of terms in state and territory legislation or common law regarding parental physical punishment of children, makes it difficult to clearly differentiate between physical punishment and physical abuse of children (Alexander et al., 2011; Naylor & Saunders, 2009) and, therefore, enables interpretations of 'reasonable' to include behaviours consistent with physical abuse (GITEACPOC, 2013).

The defence of lawful correction allows children to be the only people in Australia who can be legally slapped, kicked and hit with objects (Naylor & Saunders, 2009; RACP, 2013). This, together with a lack of clear definitions surrounding the defence of lawful correction, creates a grey area that leaves children in all Australian states and territories to some degree unprotected from physical abuse (RACP, 2013; Saunders, 2013; Tucci et al., 2006).

Parents' Rights

The majority of Australian parents believe it is their right to physically discipline their children (Tucci et al., 2006). The notion of parental rights relates back to Roman civil law doctrine of absolute paternal authority, in which wife and children were considered the husband's/father's possessions (Jones & Basser-Marks, 1996). Common Law, originally based on this doctrine, has shifted over the centuries away from paternal ownership of wife and children to women's equality and parental ownership of children. The concept

of parental ownership over children further evolved with ownership being replaced with parental guardianship over children, and guardianship being replaced with parental responsibility for the care, welfare and development of children. By shifting the emphasis from parents' rights over their children to children's rights as the main concern, parents are now akin to trustees of their children (Jones & Basser-Marks, 1996). Accordingly, parents do not have the right to physically punish their children, but can use lawful correction/reasonable chastisement as a legal defence if they inflict injuries on the child in the process of punishing or correcting the child's behaviour (Jones & Basser-Marks, 1996; Naylor & Sanders, 2009).

Some who condone the physical punishment of children argue that prohibition of parental physical punishment of children would conflict with articles 18 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), which guarantee freedom of religion and parents' choice of their children's education (GITEACPOC, 2011; Young Earth Creation Club, 2008). However, rights to freedom of religion and choice of education cannot override basic human rights, such as the right to freedom from violence (GITEACPOC, 2011, 2013). Congruent with this view, two Christian denominations in the United States have endorsed alternative disciplining strategies over physical punishment (General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 2012; United Methodist Church, 2004).

Children's Rights

As rights bearers, children are entitled to the fundamental human right to respect for human dignity and equal protection under international law (Articles 1 and 7, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), United Nations, 1948), and the right to physical integrity (Category 1, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, 1966; Saunders, 2013). The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), which Australia ratified in 1990, further states that children have the right to be equally protected by human rights, as are adults, and that a state's legislation must protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse while in the care of parents (Article 19, UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). In additional comments, the monitoring body of the UNCRC, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), has clarified that this includes protection from any violence, including physical punishment (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, 2011).

As of October 2014, 41 countries, including New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, have prohibited the physical punishment of children (some countries first repealed the defence of lawful correction and only later explicitly prohibited physical punishment); another 44 countries have followed CRC recommendations and committed to achieving full prohibition of physical punishment in the future; and

111 countries, including Australia, have not made a commitment to prohibit parental physical punishment of children (GITEACPOC, 2014). The CRC, in 1997 and 2005, made recommendations to Australia to prohibit physical punishment in all settings, and specifically to remove the parental legal defence of reasonable chastisement (CRC, 1997, 2005). The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009 endorsed the *National framework for protecting Australia's children 2009–2020* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), but this framework does not address the physical punishment of children (AIFS, 2014). In its most recent recommendation, the CRC (2012) suggests that Australia 'take all appropriate measures to explicitly prohibit corporal punishment in homes (. . .) in all states and territories' (para. 44a), and that Australia 'ensure that reasonable chastisement is not used as defence to a charge of assault of a child' (para. 45a). The CRC (2012) further states that it is

gravely concerned at the high levels of violence against women and children prevailing in the country and notes that there is an inherent risk that the coexistence of domestic violence, lawful corporal punishment, bullying, and other forms of violence in the society are interlinked, conducing to an escalation and exacerbation of the situation (para. 46).

The CRC (2012) urged the Australian Government 'to develop federal legislation as a general framework to reduce violence and promote the enactment of similar and complementary legislation at state and territory level' (para. 47). Despite the CRC's concerns and recommendations, the Australian Government has not yet expressed commitment to prohibit parental physical punishment of children (GITEACPOC, 2014).

Moving on from the Physical Punishment of Children

Although physical punishment is not an effective long-term disciplining strategy and carries the risk of harming children, 69–85% of Australian parents condone the use of physical punishment, and 92% believe that it should not be prohibited (Godfrey, 2011; Keene, 2012; Tucci et al., 2006). Factors contributing to these views include: (1) the belief that parents own their children and that physically punishing children is a parent's right (Saunders, 2013; Tucci et al., 2006); (2) fear of prosecution if physical punishment of children was banned (Bell & Romano, 2012; Leach, 2002; Naylor & Saunders, 2009); (3) social norms, including the belief that professionals approve of physical punishment (Taylor et al., 2011); and (4) lack of knowledge about the ineffectiveness of physical punishment as a parenting strategy, and the effectiveness of alternative disciplining strategies (Alexander et al., 2011; GITEACPOC, 2008). Before parental attitudes can change, all of these factors must be addressed.

Legislation

Boyson (2002) examined 11 countries that partly or fully prohibited physical punishment of children and found that

prohibiting only some types of corporal punishment was associated with confusion among parents and professionals. Results also showed that public awareness and education campaigns, when not supported by law reform, were less successful at shifting parental attitudes than campaigns that were supported by a change in legislation (Boyson, 2002). The reverse was also demonstrated. Law reform that was not supported by public awareness and education campaigns, providing parents with alternative disciplining strategies through parenting programmes, was also not successful at changing parents' attitudes towards physical punishment (Shmueli, 2010). In contrast, law reform accompanied by public awareness and education campaigns was associated with significant shifts in attitudes and behaviours, even when parents were opposed to prohibition of physical punishment of children at the start of the change process (Boyson, 2002; Modig, 2014).

In Sweden, for instance, where the defence of lawful correction was repealed in 1957 and prohibition of physical punishment was legislated in 1979, public support for physical punishment decreased from 53% in 1965, to 20% in 1982 and 9% in 2010 (Durrant, 1999; GITEACPOC, 2009b; Modig, 2014). Another example is New Zealand (NZ), where 89% of the public condoned physical punishment of children in 1981, but after physical punishment was prohibited in 2007, public support for physical punishment decreased to 58% in 2008 and to 9% in 2009 (Children's Commissioner, 2008; Lawrence & Smith, 2009). Moreover, not only did public opinion change but parents' behaviour changed as well. In 1997, 88% of NZ parents hit their children, compared with 64% in 2009 and 56% in 2012 (Johnston, 2012). Similar results were observed in Sweden and Germany. In Sweden, over 90% of parents physically punished their children in the 1960s (Modig, 2014). Following law reform, the percentage of parents using physical punishment decreased to 50% in the 1970s, 35% in the 1980s, 20% in the 1990s and 11% in the 2010s (Modig, 2014). In Germany, where physical punishment of children was banned in 2000 (GITEACPOC, 2009b), parental slapping of children decreased from 84% in 1996 to 39% in 2008 (Trunk, 2010). The reduction was even more significant for severe corporal punishment, such as boxing a child's ear: in 1996, 83% of parents used this form of physical punishment, compared with 25% in 2008 (Trunk, 2010).

It appears that law reform, in tandem with public awareness and education campaigns, reduces parental approval of physical punishment of children as well as parents' behaviour over time, even when the majority of parents condone and engage in physical punishment at the time legislation is introduced (Boyson, 2002; GITEACPOC, 2009b; Oates, 2010; Reddington, 2002; Saunders, 2013). Crucially, following law reform, the rate of severe physical punishment of children decreases (GITEACPOC, 2009a; Osterman, Bjorkqvist, & Wahlbeck, 2014; Trunk, 2010). These findings show the importance of law reform and that government

leadership is required to initiate the change process (Modig, 2014).

Help, not Punishment

While it is essential for legislative change to lead the way, it is equally important to assure parents that the aim of new legislation is to set a new standard and not to prosecute parents (GITEACPOC, 2009a, 2009b; Modig, 2014; Naylor & Saunders, 2011; Oates, 2010; RACP, 2013; Saunders, 2013; Shmueli, 2010). Leach (2002) reported results from a 1999 UK survey, indicating that 78% of parents would support the prohibition of physical punishment if parents were not prosecuted for using mild physical punishment to discipline their children. Similarly, Bell and Romano (2012) found that fear of prosecution was one of the predictors for parents opposing prohibition of physical punishment of children. In all Scandinavian countries, as well as Austria, Germany and New Zealand, physical punishment was prohibited through law reform, but the new laws were rarely used to prosecute parents (Shmueli, 2010). Shmueli (2010) suggests that legislation without prosecution 'conveys a firm message as to the importance of protecting children's rights without irreparably harming the family unit in mild cases. The purpose of the declarative statement is a legal declaration that is not intended to be enforced in practice' (p. 294). Mirroring this stance, Germany employed the slogan 'Help, Not Punishment' when physical punishment was prohibited in 2000 (GITEACPOC, 2009b). This statement indicated to parents that the government had no intention of prosecuting parents for mild physical punishment of children but, instead, was providing help by offering education about alternative disciplining strategies. Interestingly, the slogan could also be interpreted to include a change in parents' attitudes towards children, to help children learn and grow, rather than punish children for making mistakes.

It appears that positive framing of legislative change is associated with greater acceptance of changes from the public and from parents (GITEACPOC, 2009b; Saunders, 2013). In line with this, a further slogan accompanying the 2000 German law reform was 'More Respect for Children', which included information about inconsistencies in the law regarding children's rights. In Denmark, a public awareness campaign used the slogan 'When I have Children I will not Smack Them', providing a positive role model. In Germany, the idea of positive parenting was introduced with the slogan 'Love, not Slaps'. In both countries, change was not phrased in terms of parents losing their perceived right to physically punish children but, instead, change was phrased in terms of children and parents gaining respect and love (GITEACPOC, 2009b). The defence of lawful correction needs to be repealed and physical punishment of children prohibited, not with a view to prosecute parents, but in order to set a new standard and to support the change process (Modig, 2014; RACP, 2013; Saunders, 2013).

Raising Public Awareness

In order to achieve a comprehensive shift in attitude toward physical punishment of children, it is crucial that parents, professionals, and the general public understand why change is important. To this end, public awareness campaigns about the overall ineffectiveness of physical punishment as a parenting strategy, the adverse psychological effects of physical punishment on children, and the benefits of alternative disciplining strategies are essential (APS, 2014; CCCH, 2010; Oates, 2010; RACP, 2013; Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011). In Denmark, Finland, Germany and Sweden, public awareness and education campaigns (which were implemented by federal and local government agencies in conjunction with non-government agencies) employed a variety of channels that are typically used in a public health approach (GITEACPOC, 2009b). These included: (1) leaflets and brochures distributed to professionals, pharmacies, agencies working with children or families, and to private households with children; (2) posters distributed to primary schools and child care centres; (3) a television programme featuring interviews with children, therapists and mothers; and (4) video vignettes conveying the main messages screened on prime-time television.

In addition, children from all German states and the chancellor attended a children's summit, where children were given a chance to voice their ideas about children's rights and responsibilities. Three of seven changes children advocated related to the abolition of physical punishment, indicating that physical punishment was an important issue for children (GITEACPOC, 2009b). In Australia, Saunders and Goddard (2008) gave a voice to children by asking 31 children and adolescents about their view of physical punishment in a series of individual, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Participants candidly described the physical and emotional pain they experienced as a result of physical punishment, that parents sometimes hit out of anger and frustration, that parents model aggressive behaviour and are more likely to hit children at home than in public, and that they respect parents less who use physical punishment. Although some children viewed physical punishment as a natural part of being a child, most participants were clearly opposed to physical punishment (Saunders & Goddard, 2008).

Given that parents' attitudes toward physical punishment of children are influenced by professionals' opinions (Taylor et al., 2011), the position statement made by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Paediatric and Child Health Division (RACP, 2013) was an important development. The RACP's (2013) stance also generated extensive media coverage, contributing further to raising public awareness (Saunders & Goddard, 2002; White, 2013). Several other Australian professional, research and charitable organisations have taken a stance against physical punishment of children in Australia, including the Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) (2010), the National Association for Prevention of

Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) (2013), Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia (2014), White Ribbon (2014), and the Australian Psychological Society (APS) (2014). International organisations that campaign worldwide for the prohibition of physical punishment of children include the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GITEACPOC, 2013), Save the Children International (2014), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF End Violence Against Children) (United Nations Secretary-General, 2006). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005, 2012) has recommended repeatedly that Australia prohibit physical punishment of children, 'while raising awareness about the adverse consequences of corporal punishment' (CRC, 2012, para. 44). It appears that, currently, Australian professional organisations lead the way in raising awareness about the detrimental effects of physical punishment of children (ABC News, 2013; RACP, 2013; The Age, 2013).

Alternative Disciplining Strategies

Key elements associated with successful disciplining of children are cognitive-behavioural parenting strategies, such as: (1) setting clear rules and expectations that are appropriate to the child's age and developmental stage; (2) non-argumentative parental communication skills; (3) correct use of time-out or time-out alternatives, such as withdrawal of privileges (time-out or loss of a privilege need to follow the child's antisocial behaviour immediately and need to be in proportion to the child's age and the behaviour); (4) consistent responding to a child, including consistent use of time-out or time-out alternatives in response to disruptive behaviours; (5) differentiating the child from the child's behaviour (difficult behaviour, not difficult child); (6) providing the child with behaviour alternatives; (7) parental modelling of self-regulation; (8) enhancing the parent-child relationship through removal of anger from disciplining; (9) positive parent-child interactions; and (10) encouraging desirable behaviours, such as getting ready, through the use of incentives (CDC, 2009; Durrant, 2007; Oates, 2010; RACP, 2013; Tully, 2008). In addition, Durrant (2007) emphasises that it is important for parents to keep long-term goals of parenting in mind and to not let short-term frustrations or anger interfere with those long-term goals. Evidence-based cognitive-behavioural parenting programmes include all of these strategies (APS, 2014; RACP, 2013; Sanders & Kirby, 2009; Sanders & Mazzuchelli, 2013; Tully, 2008).

Parenting Programmes

To support parents, it is essential to provide parents with free and convenient access to education about new disciplining and emotion-regulation strategies (CRC, 2012; Naylor & Saunders, 2009; RACP, 2013). Many of the European countries that introduced new legislation regarding physical punishment offered structured parent education courses as part of the awareness and education campaign surrounding law reform (GITEACPOC, 2013). The Australian

Government supports positive parenting education programmes and promotes these through the *Family Support Program*, in tandem with services provided by counsellors, early childhood workers and welfare agencies (Attorney-General's Department, 2012). This is an important first step in shifting parental attitudes (CRC, 2012). The CRC (2012) endorsed Australia's move towards parent education and recommended that Australia should 'strengthen and expand awareness-raising and education campaigns, in order to promote positive and alternative forms of discipline' (para. 44).

Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker and Lutzker (2009) investigated whether the Triple-P Positive Parenting Program (Triple-P; Sanders, 1999), an Australian cognitive-behavioural parenting programme, would be effective in reducing child maltreatment when delivered as a population-based prevention programme. Triple-P training was provided to over 600 US service providers (including counsellors and social workers) who, in turn, provided parent education to more than 9000 parents. Programme delivery in the targeted areas was accompanied by universal media-based communication strategies, such as press releases, newspaper articles, newsletters to parents, radio announcements and community events. The findings of Prinz et al. indicate that a primary prevention approach can significantly reduce the rate of child maltreatment, child injury due to maltreatment and out-of-home placements in targeted areas (Prinz et al., 2009). Triple-P has also been evaluated extensively in Australia and has been shown to reduce behavioural problems in children and to increase effective parenting (Sanders, 2008; Sanders & Kirby, 2009). It is the most widely disseminated parenting programme in Australia, with the NSW government alone spending over \$A6 million since 2009 to deliver the programme to more than 30,000 families (Browne, 2013; Department of Family & Community Services/Nexus Management Consulting, 2011; Horin, 2009; NSW Government, Families NSW, 2014). Despite Triple-P's strong evidence base, Australian community service agencies suggest that no single parenting programme is suitable for all parents and, therefore, advocate the funding of a variety of parenting programmes (Horin, 2009). According to Sue Richard, the then chief executive of NSW Family Services, 'many agencies were disappointed the government had directed so much money to a single programme rather than provide some funds to enable organisations to choose parenting courses suited to their clients' (cited in Horin, 2009, para. 5).

The CEBC (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) and the Australian Parenting Research Centre (Wade et al., 2012) suggest that a number of cognitive-behavioural parenting programmes provide effective strategies to reduce disruptive child behaviour, including Triple-P (Sanders, 1999); 1–2–3 Magic Effective Discipline for Children (Phelan, 2010, 2014); 1–2–3 Magic & Emotion Coaching (Hawton & Martin, 2011); Incredible Years (Webster-Stratton, 1984); and Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) (Eyberg, 1988). However, not

all of these programmes are suited to a broad delivery approach. Parenting programmes best suited to a public health approach are those that have been evaluated in Australia (as effectiveness can vary from culture to culture); are manualised (to increase treatment fidelity); are brief (to maximise parent engagement and minimise cost); are cost-effective; and have convenient and flexible delivery options in order to reach as many parents as possible (Sanders, 2008; Gaven & Schorer, 2013; Wade et al., 2012). Parenting programmes that can be delivered to large groups of caregivers are six times more cost-effective than programmes that are delivered to individuals (Cunningham, Bremner, & Boyle, 1995). Similarly, self-administered parenting programmes, including online programmes, are more cost-effective than programmes delivered with the assistance of healthcare workers (Enebrink, Högström, Forster, & Ghaderi, 2012). In addition, self-administered programmes overcome many of the barriers that prevent some parents from attending parent education programmes in person, such as work schedules, distance, availability of child care, travel cost, stigma, concerns about confidentiality and wait lists (Koerting et al., 2013; O'Brien & Daley, 2011). Cognitive-behavioural parenting programmes that provide alternative disciplining strategies, and have been evaluated in Australia, are brief and cost-effective (either because they can be delivered to large groups or because they can be self-administered), include: Group Triple-P (Gallart & Matthey, 2005); 1–2–3 Magic (Hawton & Martin, 2011; Phelan, 2010; Porzig-Drummond, Stevenson, & Stevenson, 2014); Self-help Triple P and Triple-P Online (Sanders, Dittman, Farrugia, & Keown, 2014).

The Australian government's promotion of positive parenting programmes is an important step towards raising awareness about alternative parenting and disciplining strategies. Nevertheless, this initiative needs to be expanded upon and needs to be accompanied by public awareness campaigns and law reform (CRC, 2012).

Concluding Comments

The adverse effects and the risks associated with the physical punishment of children are numerous: increased aggressive behaviours in children, antisocial behaviours in these children as adults, anxiety, depression, substance use, personality disorders, learned aggressive responses to conflict, and physical punishment escalating into child physical abuse (Afifi et al., 2012; Anoula & Nurmi, 2005; Gershoff, 2010; Lansford et al., 2005; Zolotor et al., 2008). In addition, physical punishment is an ineffective long-term parenting strategy (APS, 2014; RACP, 2013). Cognitive-behavioural disciplining strategies, on the other hand, have been shown to be equally effective as physical punishment in obtaining immediate behaviour change, and more effective than physical punishment in achieving long-term behaviour change in children (CDC, 2009; Furlong et al., 2012; Tully, 2008). Furthermore, the defence of lawful correction or reasonable chastisement that is available to parents in all

Australian states and territories, makes children the only people in Australia who can be hit legally (Oates, 2010; Saunders, 2013), and contravenes several articles of the UNCRC (CRC, 2006, 2011; United Nations, 1989). Finally, the grey areas created by ill-defined terms within legislation and common law leave Australian children insufficiently protected from child physical abuse (Naylor & Saunders, 2009; Tucci et al., 2006). For all these reasons, an increasing number of Australian professional and charitable associations advocate law reform and the parental use of alternative disciplining strategies (APS, 2014; CCCH, 2010; RACP, 2013).

Despite the overwhelming evidence against physical punishment of children, the majority of Australian parents condone the use of physical punishment as a disciplining strategy and oppose its ban (Keene, 2012). Reasons for this viewpoint include perceived social norms, a perceived absence of alternative parenting strategies and also fear of prosecution if physical punishment was banned (Bell & Romano, 2012; Modig, 2014; Naylor & Saunders, 2009; Taylor et al., 2011). All of these concerns need to be addressed to achieve a shift in parental attitude and behaviour. First, the change process needs to be supported by a public health approach to raising awareness about the detrimental effects of physical punishment and the effectiveness of alternative disciplining strategies (Boyson, 2002; CRC, 2012; Modig, 2014). Second, parents need to be provided with free and convenient access to evidence-based parenting programmes, such as cognitive-behavioural programmes, which promote alternative disciplining strategies (CRC, 2012; RACP, 2013). For a public health approach, suitable parenting programmes need to have been evaluated in Australia, be cost-effective and offer flexible delivery options; for example, parenting programmes that can be delivered to large groups or self-directed programmes (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011). Finally, the defence of lawful correction needs to be repealed and physical punishment of children prohibited, not with a view to prosecute parents but in order to set a new standard and to move on from physical punishment of children to helping parents as well as children (Modig, 2014; RACP, 2013; Saunders, 2013).

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