

PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT AND CHILD HEALTH

Children's human right to full protection from violence

Physical punishment of children has been an unquestioned part of British culture for centuries. Many parents still smack their children in the belief that, so long as it does not cause physical injury, this is an acceptable method of discipline. Current law supports this belief by providing parents with the legal defence of “reasonable punishment” in England, Northern Ireland and Wales and “justifiable assault” in Scotland.¹

This statement

For a number of years, the following health bodies have supported legal reform to prohibit all forms of physical punishment and promote positive parenting:²

Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Royal College of Nursing
Royal Society for Public Health
Faculty of Public Health
UNITE/CPHVA (Community Practitioners and Health Visitors' Association)

This statement is issued jointly by these bodies to promote the health-based arguments for prohibiting and eliminating all forms of physical punishment. It focuses on research evidence relating to child protection, child development with particular regard to the strong associations with aggressive and anti-social behaviour, as well as to domestic violence and mental health in adult life.

Rights and ethics

The primary reason supporting legal reform is that even mild physical punishment constitutes a manifest breach of children's human rights. Human rights monitoring bodies have made this clear to the UK on a number of occasions.³ All people have a right to physical integrity, to dignity and to equality of protection under the law.⁴ Children have specific rights to healthy development and to protection from all forms of violence and from “traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.”⁵

We give great weight to the importance of scientific evidence. However, we do not require research to prove that, for example, torture or domestic violence “does not work”; indeed, we would probably consider such research unethical. Human rights do not need to be justified by evidence.

Nonetheless, because smacking is so ingrained in our and others' cultures, the ethics of researching it are rarely questioned and as a result there have been a large number of studies examining its effects. These demonstrate that, as well as the human rights' case, there is a strong evidential case against physical punishment. They suggest that complete prohibition would be a low-cost public health measure which should reap both immediate and long-term benefits.

An overview of the research on physical punishment

Almost all research into the effects of physical punishment has been conducted overseas, primarily in the US and Canada, but also in Europe, Africa and Asia.⁶

In 2002 a landmark meta-analysis was published of 88 studies that examined the association between lawful corporal punishment by parents and eleven “behaviours or experiences”.⁷ The meta-analysis found significant associations between corporal punishment and ten undesirable behaviours or experiences (the eleventh, “immediate compliance”, had mixed results and is of questionable desirability).

The conclusions of the meta-analysis were challenged by a small number of academics who have a record of supporting the case for corporal punishment. For example it was alleged that, although harsh physical punishment has damaging outcomes, there was no evidence that “non-abusive” smacking posed any risks.⁸ Or perhaps the associations were with other factors, like parents’ socioeconomic status or the level of warmth between parent and child? Or a chicken-and-egg error may have occurred, in that more aggressive and misbehaving children trigger physical punishment rather than *vice versa*.

Since the meta-analysis, more research has been undertaken to address these criticisms. Studies were controlled for confounders like parental stress, levels of emotional warmth or socioeconomic status; sophisticated statistical modelling techniques were applied to correlational studies and others were designed to test the chicken-and-egg hypothesis (using children with equivalent levels of aggression at the beginning of the study and including mid-way assessments). In addition, several large representative studies were able to draw out significant associations between “ordinary” physical punishment and negative outcomes such as aggression and mental health problems.⁹

Scientific proof on causality will never be possible in this area, because child development is dependent on multiple interrelated factors and because children cannot ethically be subjected to randomised blind-control trials. Nonetheless the cumulative implications of this body of research are striking. No benefits from physical punishment have been found. On the contrary, virtually all the studies suggest that physical punishment impacts negatively on children’s mental and physical well-being, education and cognitive development. Far from teaching children how to behave it fails to create moral internalisation or self-discipline, increases antisocial behaviour and damages family relationships. And when children grow up the experience of physical punishment appears to increase their likelihood of suffering poor health, particularly mental health, or engaging in self-destructive or antisocial behaviours.

Child safeguarding

All smacks carry potential risk of harm. Even a mild smack may cause an unintended injury or can cause small children to topple and hit furniture. But, most dangerously, physical punishment carries an inbuilt risk of escalation, from mild smacks to hard blows. This is because its effectiveness in controlling children’s behavior decreases over time, encouraging the parent to increase the intensity of the punishment.¹⁰ Risk of escalation is also increased by the fact that those inflicting physical punishment are often angry and use a level of force beyond what was intended.¹¹

All 10 of the studies on child protection in the meta-analysis found that physical punishment was significantly associated with unlawful “abuse”.¹² Large-scale studies in the USA and Canada found that the majority of cases substantiated by the authorities as physical abuse were also cases of physical punishment.¹³ And it is clear, for example from ChildLine figures, that those identified by child protection professionals are just the tip of an iceberg of children who suffer severe and degrading assaults in the name of discipline every day.¹⁴

The defence of “reasonable punishment” in England, Northern Ireland and Wales is currently available for common assault of a child. The definition of common assault does not exclude assaults that risk serious injury, for example blows to head or stomach, or assaults that cause children pain or humiliation, nor does it exclude very frequent assaults.¹⁵ In Scotland the use of implements, shaking and blows to the head are prohibited but the law does not, for example, exclude punches that cause “actual bodily harm”.¹⁶

These laws are harmful for children, confusing for parents and profoundly inhibiting for child protection professionals. Child protection can only be undertaken within a strong legal framework and the only law that will secure children’s safety is one that unambiguously prohibits all forms of physical punishment.

Children’s healthy development

Physical punishment is an ineffective form of discipline. In the meta-analysis, three of the five studies on the topic found that corporal punishment is associated with immediate compliance but 13 of the 15 studies on long-term compliance found that corporal punishment does not contribute to the child’s ability to behave well in the long term, to internalise the lesson and acquire self-discipline.¹⁷

Physical punishment has been found to reduce empathy¹⁸ and moral regulation¹⁹ and to increase behaviour problems, such as bullying, lying, cheating, running away, truancy and involvement in crime.²⁰ In 12 of the 13 studies included on this issue in the meta-analysis, it was found to be significantly associated with an increase in delinquent and antisocial behaviour.²¹ This has been confirmed by a number of later studies.²²

Above all, research shows an association with increased aggression in children. All 27 studies on the topic in the meta-analysis found a positive association.²³ Later research has shown, for example, that children who have experienced physical punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers,²⁴ to approve of the use of violence in peer relationships, to bully and to experience violence from their peers,²⁵ to use violent methods to resolve conflict²⁶ and to be aggressive towards their parents.²⁷

The association with aggression continues into adult life, and can be particularly linked to domestic violence. Physical punishment was associated with violence towards a partner as an adult in all five studies on this topic in the meta-analysis, and this has been confirmed in more recent studies.²⁸ A study which used data from over 4,400 adults in the USA found that the more men and women had experienced physical punishment as teenagers, the more likely they were to physically assault their partners as adults and to approve of violence in adult relationships.²⁹ “A study of

anthropological records of 186 cultural groups from all world regions found that societies which made more frequent use of physical punishment endorsed other forms of violence more.³⁰

Another unintended consequence of smacking is on sexual development. There are self-acknowledged links between being physically punished as a child and being sexually excited by “disciplinary” sex.³¹ Recent research also shows that the more physical punishment a child experiences, the more likely he or she is to have coercive sex, and to engage in risky sex and masochistic sex when adult.³²

Mental health

In the meta-analysis, all 13 studies on the topic found an association between corporal punishment and a decrease in the quality of the parent-child relationship. Later studies have found that corporal punishment is associated with poor attachment by young infants to their mothers³³ and with poor family relationships in adolescence³⁴ and young adulthood.³⁵

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that all 12 studies in the meta-analysis relating to mental health in childhood found that corporal punishment is significantly associated with behaviour disorders, anxiety disorders, depression and hopelessness.³⁶ Later studies have found associations with suicide attempts, low self-esteem, hostility and emotional instability.³⁷ This is consistent with research which has found that experience of physical punishment is linked to risk-taking behaviours including smoking, alcohol and drug consumption and fighting.³⁸

These associations can be traced into adulthood. All eight studies on mental health in adulthood in the meta-analysis found an association between corporal punishment and poor mental health, including low self-esteem, depression and alcoholism, self-harm and suicidal tendencies.³⁹ Significant later studies include a nationally representative US study which found associations with major depression, mania, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug abuse and personality disorders.⁴⁰

Time for change

The paramount purpose of a legal ban is to prevent children being physically punished in the first place, not to prosecute parents after they’ve hurt their children. Raising children is never easy, particularly when parents are struggling with difficult circumstances like financial problems or inadequate housing or failing relationships. But the evidence is that parents don’t enjoy smacking and tend to use it when they are stressed or angry.⁴¹ When parents give up smacking they invariably find that family life and children’s behaviour improves and they are happy to have taken this step.⁴²

However, parents will not stop using physical punishment while the law continues to condone their actions. It is also clear, from the countries that have banned smacking, and from public health initiatives, that any change in the law should ideally be accompanied by as much support and information for parents as possible.⁴³ Fortunately many of the organisations supporting this reform are already committed to making such provision.

Over thirty countries have now outlawed all forms of physical punishment.⁴⁴ These countries show no evidence of adverse consequences such as unnecessary

prosecutions of parents, increasing numbers of children in care or children becoming out of control.⁴⁵ On the contrary, such bans are associated with encouraging reductions in violence to children.⁴⁶ Those who worry that a ban on smacking might lead to lax parenting or badly behaved children should note that the countries that have banned are consistently at the top UNICEF league table of child well-being in developed countries, including its measurement of children's behaviours and risks.⁴⁷

We believe, on the basis of available evidence, that legal reform to ban all forms of physical punishment will contribute to children's health and development, will improve child protection and family relationships and is likely to reduce levels of violence and antisocial behaviour in society generally. We therefore urge the government to take action without delay.

¹ Section 58 of the Children Act 2004 and section 51 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003

² They have all taken formal decisions to support the aims of the Children Are Unbeatable Alliance!, for full legal reform to ban physical punishment and to promote positive discipline

³ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (three times: 1995, 2002 and 2008) and in General Comments No.8 on *The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment* in 2006 and No. 15 on *The right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health* in 2013; The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2002); The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2008) and The European Committee of Social Rights (2005). Also recommendations from other states in the Universal Periodic Review, UN Human Rights Council (2008 and 2012).

⁴ See International Covenants of the UN and the Human Rights Act/European Convention on Human Rights.

⁵ Articles 6, 19 and 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

⁶ The reasons are unclear but it seems almost a taboo subject in the UK. For example, the topic is not mentioned in any of the child protection reviews, inquiries or official guidance of the last decade despite the fact that the deaths of children triggering this attention involved physical punishment.

⁷ Gershoff, E. T. (2002), "Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review", *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4), 539-579; see also Gershoff, E. T. (2008) "Report on physical punishment in the United States: what research tells us about its effects on children", Columbus, Ohio: Center for Effective Discipline.

⁸ This is defined by R Larzelere and B Kuhn in "Comparing Child Outcomes of Physical Punishment and Alternative Disciplinary Tactics: A Meta-Analysis" *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2005, Vol. 8 (1), 1-37 as "about two open-hand swats to the buttocks when a parent is not angrily out of control" which should "never be used in an infant's first 12 months of life and rarely if at all before 18 months of age".

⁹ Durrant J and Ensom R (2012) "Physical punishment of children: lessons from 20 years of research" *Canadian Medical Association Journal* DOI:10.1503 gives a useful overview of these studies.

¹⁰ See note 7; also Strauss M and Douglas E (2008) "Research on spanking of children: implications for public policy" *The Family Psychologist*, Vol 24, No. 1, p. 18

¹¹ Durrant, J. E. et al (2004), [*Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*](#), Ottawa: Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth

¹² See note 7. All violent punishment is abusive, hence the quotation marks.

¹³ Trocmé, N. et al (2010), *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Executive Summary & Chapters 1-5*, Public Health Agency of Canada: Ottawa, 2010; see also A. & Trocmé, N. (2013), [*Physical Abuse and Physical Punishment in Canada*](#), Child Canadian Welfare Research Portal Information Sheet # 122. Kadushin A & Martin J A (1981), *Child abuse: An interactional event*, New York: Columbia University Press, p.249

¹⁴ See ChildLine casenotes "What children and young people tell ChildLine about physical abuse." Physical punishment is routinely one of the top three reasons children contact ChildLine, though it should be noted that the age group most commonly physically punished (between two and seven years) are usually too young use this helpline.

¹⁵ See note 1 and Crown Prosecution Service, *Offences against the person, incorporating the Charging Standard*, guidance October 2009

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- ¹⁶ See note 1
- ¹⁷ See note 7
- ¹⁸ Lopez, N. et al (2001) "Parental disciplinary history, current levels of empathy, and moral reasoning in young adults", *North American Journal of Psychology*, 3:193-204
- ¹⁹ Kerr, D. C. R. et al (2004) "Parental Discipline and Externalizing Behavior Problems in Early Childhood: The Role of Moral Regulation and Child Gender", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 32(4): 369-383
- ²⁰ Brenner, V., & Fox, R.A. (1998) "Parental discipline and behavior problems in young children", *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 159(2): 251-256
- ²¹ See note 7
- ²² For example, Loeber, R. et al (2000) "Stability of Family Interaction from Ages 6 to 18", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 28(4): 353-369
- ²³ See note 7
- ²⁴ Ani, C.C., & Grantham-McGregor, S. (1998) "Family and personal characteristics of aggressive Nigerian boys: Differences from and similarities with Western findings", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23(5): 311-317
- ²⁵ Ohene, S. et al (2006) "Parental Expectations, Physical Punishment, and Violence Among Adolescents Who Score Positive on a Psychosocial Screening Test in Primary Care", *Pediatrics* 117(2): 441-447
- ²⁶ Hart, C.H. et al (1990) "Children's expectations of the outcomes of social strategies: Relations with sociometric status and maternal disciplinary styles", *Child Development*, 61(1): 127-137
- ²⁷ Ulman, A. & Straus, M. A. (2003) "Violence by children against mothers in relation to violence between parents and corporal punishment by parents", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 34: 41-60
- ²⁸ See, for example, Contreras, M. et al (2012), *Bridges to Adulthood: Understanding the Lifelong Influence of Men's Childhood Experiences of Violence*, Analyzing Data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey, Washington DC: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Promundo
- ²⁹ Straus, M. A., & Yodanis, C. L. (1996), "Corporal punishment in adolescence and physical assaults on spouses later in life: What accounts for the link?" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 825-841
- ³⁰ Lansford, J. E. & Dodge, K. A. (2008), "Cultural Norms for Adult Corporal Punishment of Children and Societal Rates of Endorsement and Use of Violence", *Parenting: Science and Practice* 8: 257-270
- ³¹ See for example Ian Gibson, 1978, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian Britain and After* Duckworth.
- ³² See for example, Douglas, Emily M and Murray A Straus. 2006. *Assault and injury of dating partners by university students in 19 countries and its relation to corporal punishment experienced as a child*. *European Journal of Criminology* 3:293-318. More on <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2/CP-Empirical.htm>
- ³³ Coyl, D. D. et al (2002) "Stress, Maternal Depression, and Negative Mother-Infant Interactions in Relation to Infant Attachment", *Infant Mental Health Journal* 23(1-2):145-163
- ³⁴ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), "Prevalence and correlates of physical abuse in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents: A population-based approach", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23: 549-557
- ³⁵ Leary, C. E. et al (2008) "Parental Use of Physical Punishment as Related to Family Environment, Psychological Well-being, and Personality in Undergraduates", *Journal of Family Violence* 23:1-7
- ³⁶ See note 7
- ³⁷ Fergusson, D.M. and Lynskey, M.T. (1997) "Physical punishment/maltreatment during childhood and adjustment in young adulthood", *Child Abuse and Neglect* 21: 617-30; Piyanjali de Zoysa et al (2008), "Corporal Punishment in the Sri Lankan Context: Psychological Outcomes for Our Children", in Devore, D. M. (2006), *New Developments in Parent-Child Relations*, Nova Science Publishers Inc
- ³⁸ Lau, J. T. F. et al (1999), "Prevalence and correlates of physical abuse in Hong Kong Chinese adolescents: A population-based approach", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23: 549-557
- ³⁹ See note 7
- ⁴⁰ Afifi, T. O. et al (2012), "Physical Punishment and Mental Disorders: Results From a Nationally Representative US Sample", *Pediatrics*, 2 July 2012
- ⁴¹ Bunting L, Webb M A and Healy J, *In two minds? Parental attitudes toward physical punishment in the UK*, *Children & Society* Vol 24 (2010), pp 359-370
- ⁴² See note 7; also Beauchaine T. P. et al (2005), "Mediators, moderators, and predictors of 1-year outcomes among children treated for early-onset conduct problems: a latent growth curve analysis", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 73: 371-88, a study of 500 families trained away from

the use of physical punishment which exactly correlated with an improvement in the children's behaviour.

⁴³ For example Sweden, which has the highest levels of change in parental use and approval of physical punishment, printed the new law on milk cartons and distributed a 16 page booklet on positive parenting to every household with children.

⁴⁴ These include 17 EU states with a further five committed to a ban, only France, Belgium, Ireland, Malta and the UK have neither prohibited physical punishment nor committed to doing so.

⁴⁵ See, for example, New Zealand's six-monthly police reports following its ban in 2007 which show no increase in prosecutions, and Modig C (2009) "Never violence - thirty years on from Sweden's abolition of corporal punishment", Government Offices of Sweden and Save the Children Sweden which show parental use of physical punishment is now at 10%. (It should perhaps be noted that Sweden repealed parents' legal defence in 1957, when physical punishment was used by 90% of parents. The 1979 reform was to remove any ambiguity about the law).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Bussmann, K. D. (2009) *The Effect of Banning Corporal Punishment in Europe: A Five-Nation Comparison*, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

⁴⁷ UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2013) *Child well-being in rich countries – A comparative overview Innocenti Report Card 11*. Indicators on behaviour include teenage smoking, drinking, use of cannabis, fighting, being bullied, taking exercise, pregnancy and NEET rate (percentage of 15 to 19 year-olds not in education, employment or training).