

IT HURTS  
YOU  
INSIDE

Young children **talk about smacking**



Save the Children

Children's Rights Alliance  
for England

This booklet has been put together by the Children's Rights Alliance for England and Save the Children UK, to assist parliamentarians in the Children Bill debate on whether or not babies and children should have the same protection from assault as adults.

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The Children's Rights Alliance for England is a coalition of over 200 voluntary and statutory organisations and individuals committed to the fullest implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Save the Children fights for children in the UK and around the world who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice and violence. It works with them to find lifelong answers to the problems they face.

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***"It feels like someone banged you with a hammer."***

(five-year-old girl)

***"Sometimes if you smack, if it was an adult like my daddy, he can smack very hard ... he can smack you like a stone ... and you'll cry."*** (seven-year-old boy)

***"I was just thinking that ... if they changed the law then a lot of people will realise what they had done to their child and they would probably ... be happy that the law was changed. If they don't change the law they will think 'oh well, the child doesn't mind so we can keep on doing it'. But if they realise that children have been talking to adults about it then I think they will definitely realise that it hurts their child and they will be very upset with themselves."***

(seven-year-old girl)

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# Foreword

## Chair, United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Mr. Jones is a well-respected employer and he loves his employees. He wants his business to be as successful and productive as possible. He needs well-disciplined workers to achieve that. He makes a rule that an employee who is not following his instruction, is late for work or responds too slow, will be subject to “reasonable chastisement”. He specifies what that chastisement will be – e.g. two slaps on the left hand of the worker (or the right hand if the worker is left handed). It will be done in the office of the Director to avoid public embarrassment.

Such a practice would be entirely unacceptable in every State in the world, result in a public outcry and, most likely, serious legal consequences, including prosecution of that employer.

But if we replace the employer with a parent and the worker with a child, “reasonable chastisement” all of a sudden becomes acceptable. The excuse is usually that parents hit their children out of good intentions, or that it is in their “best interests”.

But excuses are not justifications. An employer who hits one of his or her workers, even if done with the best intentions, commits an assault and violates the human dignity and physical integrity of that worker.

Children in this survey – and in many other situations – tell you why hitting a child is wrong. Listen to them as you would listen to the employees when they tell you that smacking or other violence is wrong.

In this world, 192 governments have promised that they will take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from *all forms of violence* (article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). This includes the UK Government.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in charge of monitoring this Convention, has recommended that governments should systematically:

- Prohibit all forms of violence, including all corporal punishment however light, in the upbringing of children in their homes, in schools, in care institutions and any other place;

- Undertake – at the same time – educational and awareness raising campaigns to inform parents and other caretakers about children’s right to protection and about non-violent methods of disciplining and raising children.

Many citizens and politicians regularly express their concern about increasing violence in their societies. The credibility of this concern is questionable as long as they are not willing to seriously address the use of violence against children. And don’t suggest that a little bit of violence is acceptable. It is not! That applies equally for adults and children.

Do you want a violence-free society? Walk the talk and make sure that your law prescribes that an act of violence against any and every person (white, black, big, small, boy, girl etc.) is an unacceptable violation of human dignity and physical integrity.

**Jaap Doek**  
October 2004

## **Introduction**

The National Children’s Bureau and Save the Children UK carried out a study with young children in 1997 to ensure they could be part of the public debate on physical punishment in the family. This booklet summarises the research findings.

Today, the findings continue to provide powerful evidence of how children are affected by physical punishment.

### **The method**

Sixteen small group discussions were held with 76 children aged between five and seven (there was one four-year-old) in six schools and two summer play schemes in England. The appendix provides further information about the research method.

## Children's main messages

**Children spoke powerfully and eloquently. They did not only express themselves through words; they also stood up and gave graphic demonstrations of being smacked.**

They had ten key messages:

1. Smacking is hitting. Most of the 76 children who took part in this study described a smack as a hard or very hard hit.
2. Smacking hurts.
3. Smacking is wrong. The vast majority of the children who took part disapproved of smacking.
4. Children react badly to being smacked. They get upset and angry and sometimes they want to smack someone else.
5. Adults regret smacking.
6. Parents and other grown-ups are the people who most often smack children.
7. Children usually get smacked indoors, and they most often get smacked on their bottom, arm or head.
8. Children do not smack adults because they are scared they will be hit again.
9. Adults do not smack each other because they are big and know better, and because they love and care about each other.
10. Half the children involved in this study said they would not smack children when they are adults. The youngest children (five-year-olds) were the most emphatic about this.

## What is a smack?

Most children (43 out of 76) described a smack as *“a hit”, “a hard hit”* or *“a very hard hit”*. Only one child described a smack as being a *“pat”*, though she quickly added *“only harder”*.

***“[It’s] when someone hits you really hard.”*** (five-year-old girl)

Child (aged six)	It’s a really hard hit.
Adult	Can it be a soft hit?
Child	No.

***“A smack is when people hit you and it stings and I cry.”***  
(five-year-old girl)

***“It’s like very hard hitting and it hurts you.”*** (six-year-old girl)

***“It’s when someone is cross with you, they hit you and it hurts.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

Children frequently stood up to give a demonstration of smacking. They swung their hands towards their legs, bottom and arms to hit themselves with different degrees of force. On some occasions, they gave a demonstration but then explained that a *“real smack”* would be a lot harder. A seven-year-old girl observed:

***“[A smack is] parents trying to hit you, [but] instead of calling [it] a hit they call it a smack.”***

## What does it feel like to be smacked?

This question was answered in two ways. First, children described the physical sensations of being smacked; second, they talked about how smacking makes them feel inside.

The overwhelming message is that smacking hurts, physically and emotionally. Many children vividly described the physical pain inflicted by smacking:

***“It feels like someone banged you with a hammer.”*** (five-year-old girl)

***“It hurts and it’s painful inside - it’s like breaking your bones.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“It’s like when you’re in the sky and you’re falling to the ground and you just hurt yourself.”*** (seven-year-old boy)

***“[It feels] like someone’s punched you or kicked you or something.”*** (six-year-old boy)

The emotional impact was clear too:

***“[It] hurts your feelings inside.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

***“[It makes you] grumpy and sad and also really upset inside. And really hurt.”***  
(five-year-old girl)

***“It hurts a lot, it makes you unhappy.”***  
(six-year-old girl)

***“You cry and you’re miserable.”***  
(five-year-old boy)

***“You’re hurt and it makes you cry [and] drips come out of your eyes.”*** (five-year-old girl)

Children explained how smacking can have a negative effect on parent-child relationships:

***“And you feel you don’t like your parents anymore.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“It feels, you feel sort of as though you want to run away because they’re sort of like being mean to you and it hurts a lot.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

Asking for help does not always work. A five-year-old girl explained:

***“It feels bad or sad when your dad or mum smacks you – you try and tell your aunties but they do nothing.”***

Some children described feeling embarrassed and ashamed:

***“It feels like [they] shouldn’t have done that, it hurts. It feels embarrassed, it feels like you are really sorry and it hurts.”***

(seven-year-old girl)

## **Who usually smacks children?**

All of the children who answered this question mentioned parents. Mums were mentioned slightly more than dads. Most of the children (52 out of 76) mentioned grandparents. A six-year-old girl explained:

***“Well, I think mostly family and sometimes friends who get quite cross with you like [your] mum and dad, grandma and grandad and friends that live quite near here, in the same street.”***

A five-year-old girl gave the following list:

***“Their parents or your mummy or your daddy or your grandad or your auntie or your grandma or people in your house – a big person has to hit a little person because they’re naughty.”***

A seven-year-old girl said:

***“Let’s say your mum and dad have gone out and you’ve been naughty, your grandmother [will smack you but] mostly your mum and dad.”***

Aunts and uncles were specifically mentioned and some children mentioned adults who are not relatives, including nannies (those paid to look after children in the home).

A six-year-old girl listed *“mums and dads and aunties and foster people and foster children”*.

A seven-year-old girl said, *“Usually their parents and relations and occasionally you might get a teacher”* while a five-year-old said, *“sometimes babysitters”*.

Strangers also presented potential dangers to children. A five-year-old boy listed *“thieves, kidnappers, mums and dads [and] nasty men”* as people that usually smack children.

A five-year-old girl described lots of adults being around when a child is being hit:

*“Sometimes your uncles and aunties are there and your mum and dads are there and they can smack you really hard or they can smack you with a cane.”*

## Where do children usually get smacked?

It was assumed by the researchers that children would begin by talking about where on the body children are usually smacked, but almost all of them talked immediately about the location in which children are smacked. Children’s statements were revealing:

*“[Children get smacked] in a corner because the parents wouldn’t want to do it so everyone could see ‘cos then [the children] might call someone else and they might come and take the children, so they’ll go in a corner and smack.”* (six-year-old boy)

A seven-year-old boy said:

*“If there were thousands of people looking, then [the] mum as well as the child will get very embarrassed probably ... it would be a bit rude to do it in front of everybody.”*

Some children said that parents are not inhibited in public spaces:

*“It depends where ... you’ve done it, because sometimes if you were naughty in the street, [the mum] would usually just do it straight away, otherwise they would do it again. So I think wherever you did it, even if there is anyone looking.”* (seven-year-old boy)

*“When you go shopping and take something and you go and ask your parents and your parents will hit you and embarrass you.”*  
(five-year-old girl)

Most children (53 out of 76) said that children are smacked in the home (the bedroom was the most common place). Shopping was the next most common location, followed by the house of a grandparent or other relative.

In terms of where on their bodies children are smacked, children said it is usually on the bottom. But being smacked on other parts of the body was also common:

***"On my bum, on my face, on my head and on my arm and on the belly and on the legs."*** (five-year-old girl)

***"I think children usually get smacked on the side of their face or on their tummy. Sometimes it depends how they were. If they were really naughty, it would be on their bottom but sometimes it's usually on their hands."*** (seven-year-old)

***"[They] hit you on the head where they're not supposed to hit you."*** (seven-year-old boy)

## **How do children act after they have been smacked?**

There were two aspects to children's responses to this question: first, they described what children do after they have been smacked; second, they explained how children feel after they have been smacked.

There were many suggestions about what children do after they have been smacked. They:

- Cry and are upset
- Are naughty, cheeky or nasty
- Say sorry and try to make amends
- Go, or are sent, to their bed/bedroom
- Smack back
- Smack somebody else
- Are quiet
- Tell someone
- Get another smack
- Repeat the same mistake.

***“Cry, and sometimes if they haven’t got a handle on their door in their bedrooms – like I haven’t – they lock themselves inside.”***

(five-year-old boy)

***“Sometimes they get sent to bed. They start crying. And sometimes I get sent to bed and I get no tea later.”*** (six-year-old boy)

***“They get angry and grumpy and cross with their mummies.”***

(five-year-old girl)

***“They scream and cry on the bed.”*** (six-year-old boy)

***“They act naughty and start to hurt people ... they’re very angry and the adult thinks they can do as he wants.”*** (five-year-old girl)

***“Some of them if they’re really naughty they do the same mistake again and if they’re good they learn from their mistake.”***

(six-year-old boy)

Children described a range of feelings that are aroused after being smacked. They:

- Are upset and sad
- Feel angry, grumpy and cross
- Are frightened they might be hit again
- Feel they are bad or naughty
- Feel embarrassed
- Think parents are silly
- Feel ashamed.

***“It hurts very very much and you could just say to the children ‘go in your bedroom for a few hours and watch the telly and later I’ll have your tea ready’.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“My friend, she’s six – cos when she’s been naughty, she always gets smacked and she doesn’t like it. And I don’t like getting smacked either because it hurts so much”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“I’ve thought of another answer ... if they’re very little, they might think it’s right to smack and go off and smack somebody else”***

(seven-year-old girl)

A five-year-old suggested that children might think it's funny they have been smacked while another said children might pretend to cry. These untypical responses imply that even very young children may sometimes try to underrate the impact of being hit – a practice more commonly associated with adults.

## How do adults act after they have given a smack?

The children associated being smacked with adults being angry or bad-tempered: many of them said that adults get cross or *“look mad”* after they have given a smack.

A seven-year-old girl said adults' faces *“turn beetroot when they are mad”*; a five-year-old said, *“they sort of walk around very fast”*; and a four-year-old boy said adults who smack *“get a grumpy face, like that [shows teeth]”*.

Others mentioned adults shouting or swearing at them. A seven-year-old boy said adults *“might pull faces after they have smacked, or put their middle finger up at you”*.

A large proportion of the children said that adults feel sorry, or regret their actions:

***“I think they feel a bit sort of sorry but they don't want to say, but they do.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“They don't feel like they wanted to smack in the first place.”***  
(five-year-old girl)

A few children gave examples of parents apologising to children and trying to make amends by taking them to the park or the beach or buying them sweets.

A small number of children said they thought that adults feel pleased with themselves or happy after they have smacked; a five-year-old said adults sometimes laugh afterwards.

Two children said that if children's bedroom doors have keyholes then their parents might lock them in. One child said adults might grab them, another said they might give them *“a hiding”*.

Some children talked about adults ignoring them after they have smacked and/or immediately returning to what they were doing before they smacked:

***"If they're outside the door talking to someone then they could just come in and smack you and then go out again."*** (six-year-old boy)

***"Well, they usually are still quite cross, and if you need them afterwards, they don't really reply. They just keep on doing what they do."*** (six-year-old girl)

## **Why don't children smack adults?**

The most frequent answer to this question was that children are too scared of being hit back. As one six-year-old girl explained, *"because if they smack adults the adults smack them back and it hurts"*.

Many children said that adults are bigger and so can hit harder than them.

***"Children may want to smack adults because they feel cross and mad, but they [don't because they] think the adult is going to smack you back really hard."*** (six-year-old boy)

One seven year-old boy eagerly replied:

***"That's simple! Because it's very rude to smack your parents because they're bigger and older and they might hurt you back and they might be silly when they're drunk and they might hit you."***

Later in the discussions a seven-year-old boy, talking about why it is wrong to smack, conveyed powerfully what it can feel like to be hit by a much bigger and stronger person:

***"Sometimes if you smack, if it was an adult like my daddy, he can smack very hard ... he can smack you like a stone ... and you'll cry."***

Some children said that children are too little or too young to smack:

***“Because the children lost their temper and they think they’re adults but they’re not, they’re just children.”***

A seven-year-old girl alluded to children’s low status, *“Adults are bigger and stronger and people treat them more seriously”*.

Another seven-year-old explained that, *“Children don’t smack adults, because adults are older than children and you deserve a smack if you get on adults’ nerves”*.

Other children said that children do not smack adults because it is wrong. A five year-old girl said children are not allowed to smack adults *“because it’s bad manners”*.

Two children said it might hurt the grown-up and a five-year-old girl said that, *“No-one should smack anyone”*.

## **Why don’t adults smack each other?**

The most frequent reason children gave for adults not smacking each other was that they are bigger and know better. Some children said adults are better able to control themselves.

***“Grown-ups don’t smack each other because ... they are older and they know better and let’s say there were two people, one got very cross with someone, they smack them and then it would be very naughty and they would feel very embarrassed. And the reason children smack each other is because they are in a kind of habit. Grown-ups grow out of the habit and if they still have the habit they don’t smack each other, instead they smack children.”***

(seven-year-old girl)

Several children said that adults do not smack each other because they love each other and are friends or because they respect one another:

***“Because they must respect each other ‘cos if they smacked each other they won’t like each other.”*** (five-year-old girl)

Some children said that adults do not want to hurt each other or start a fight, while a small number said it would be embarrassing. Adults actively choosing not to hit each other was mentioned often. Interestingly, only a few children suggested that adults do not smack each other because they are not naughty.

## Will you smack children when you are big?

The younger children were significantly less in favour of smacking than the older children. This may be related to children's experience of being hit (research shows that parental physical punishment is more prevalent among toddlers and younger children), or it could be that older children have started to rationalise and take on the prevalent adult attitude that smacking is a legitimate part of parenting.

Age group	No. who answered question	No. (and percentage) who said they will not smack when they are big
5-year-olds	20	13 (65%)
6-year-olds	24	12 (50%)
7-year-olds	27	11 (41%)

A six-year-old boy said:

***"I would smack children when I'm at the age of 20 or an adult because if I'm a parent you have to smack children."***

Another six-year-old boy advised:

***"No, cos it's nasty and you go in a huff, and they hit you."***

There was considerable concern among children about the effects of parents smacking children, children then smacking their own children, and the "habit" continuing into future generations.

***“No, because I think smacking is not very nice and I when I grow up I hope my children will be nice. And I’m not gonna smack them because ... say when they grow up and they can still remember that day when they got smacked ... and then they’ll start a fight ... and they’ll smack little children.”*** (seven-year-old boy)

***“Because it’s mean and it hurts the child and they’ll just learn to smack people and they’ll go on and it won’t help at all.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

Children who said they would not smack when they are adults said they wanted to have positive relationships with children. A five-year-old girl explained:

***“Because I’m going to make friends with the little child and I’m going to take them to the park or a party or a disco.”***

Another five-year-old said he wouldn’t smack because *“I want to be friendly”*.

## **Is it wrong to smack?**

Almost all the children who answered this question (66 out of 72) said smacking is wrong. Many referred to smacking generally rather than thinking about whether it is wrong just for adults to smack children.

The answers to this question once again revealed the physical and emotional pain inflicted by smacking:

***“It’s painful and it sets a wrong example for other people.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

***“It hurts and you could break a bone or something. If you did it hard enough, you could damage something.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“When you’re smacked, you might have a very big cut and you might feel very poorly and you might have a stomach ache and they might smack your stomach and it might feel even worse.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

***“It will give you a pain. It might stop your blood for a few minutes.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“I think it’s wrong because you might get hurt and you might get a bruise or a lump. And it’s horrible.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

The dangers in smacking were also emphasised:

***“Wrong, because you might fall.”*** (six-year-old boy)

A seven-year-old girl described the injustice of children being smacked for doing something accidentally:

***“Probably you did it by accident and it looked like you did it on purpose and they smacked you and it was wrong to smack.”***

## **How can we stop children being smacked?**

Most children interpreted this question as meaning what they or their parents could do to stop smacking. They were not asked about changing the law, although some did mention this.

Mostly children began by talking about their own behaviour; there was much emphasis on the need for children to be good.

***“Being good and do what you’re told to do.”*** (six-year-old boy)

***“By being good for all your life.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“Stop being cheeky to your mam and stop telling lies and don’t cause trouble with the other kids because then your mam will tell the other mam and they’ll have an argument and you will cause an argument and if I tell lies I get a hiding and a smack.”*** (five-year-old girl)

Children were not viewed as the sole people responsible for ending smacking; many children said that parents could act differently. Suggestions included parents sending children to their room; verbally instructing children to stop what they are doing; and encouraging children to behave positively through rewards.

Children in one group believed strongly that if parents understood what it feels like to be smacked, then they would stop. Three seven-year-old girls suggested:

***“They might have been smacked when they were little, they were brought up with smacking them so they think it’s right to smack.”***

***“They might remember being smacked but not really remember how it feels because it seems so long ago. And as they got older when they thought about it they forgot how it feels.”***

***“We could tell them how it feels and if we do something naughty then they could make you stop it by telling them in words.”***

Other children gave the following advice:

***“... you can say ‘well, how would you feel if somebody bigger came up to you and smacked you?’ And say things like that and [say], ‘it doesn’t help at all because you’re just going to make it worse’.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

***“If it is against the law and if people who are in special organisations [could] link to have the right to say ... put posters up in places saying ... ‘Please can you stop smacking children’.”***  
(seven-year-old girl)

***“I was just thinking that if they changed the law then a lot of people will realise what they had done to their child and they would probably ... be happy that the law was changed. If they don’t change the law they will think ‘oh well, the child doesn’t mind so we can keep on doing it’. But if they realise that children have been talking to adults about it then I think they will definitely realise that it hurts their child and they will be very upset with themselves.”*** (seven-year-old girl)

***“If there were only six [people who believe smacking is wrong] – but I don’t think there is – then I don’t think he [Tony Blair] would change the law. If there is a lot of people like, I don’t know, 70 or something then I think he would definitely change the law.”***

(seven-year-old girl)

## **What next?**

All of the children in this study had something to say about smacking and it was clear that most of them were speaking from personal experience. Many gave moving accounts of what smacking feels like and why it should be stopped.

Will another generation of children grow up with similar experiences?  
It is up to all of us ... it is up to you.

## Appendix: the research method

Sixteen small group discussions were held with 76 children aged between five and seven (there was one four-year-old) in six schools and two summer play schemes in England.

One school was an independent fee-paying school. Another was a Church of England school. The rest had diverse catchment areas.

In 14 of the 16 discussion groups, a teacher or other adult from the school or play scheme was present throughout.

Parents were fully briefed in advance and gave written permission for their children to take part. Children's consent was obtained at the beginning of each discussion, when they were advised that they could opt out at any stage of the proceedings (either by leaving the room or not answering particular questions).

Each of the school groups was divided according to age, with five, six and seven year-olds talking together. The summer play scheme groups were mixed.

A community artist was commissioned to create a storybook with a character to whom the children could easily relate. This character was called Splodge. It was introduced to children as not knowing much about the world. Each page of the storybook had a question from Splodge.

### The children

Slightly more girls (57%) than boys (43%) were involved; 32% were five-year-olds, 32% were aged six and 36% were aged seven. One child was four.

Twenty percent of the children were from black and minority ethnic communities. Eighteen percent of the children said they needed special help in school. Fifty percent of those who took part lived in the South of England, 26% lived in the Midlands and 24% in the North of England.

The majority (51%) of the children were living with both birth parents and siblings.

### The adults

Carolyne Willow and Tina Hyder carried out the study. Carolyne is a former child protection social worker with many years' experience of consulting and working with children. Tina is an early years specialist and has worked directly with young children and as a lecturer in early childhood studies.

David Orli created Splodge.



**For separate reports about children's views on smacking in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, please see the following publications:**

- **Northern Ireland:**  
Horgan, Goretti (2002) *It's a hit not a smack*.  
Save the Children, tel: 028 904 3 1123
- **Scotland:**  
Cutting, Elizabeth (2001) *It doesn't sort anything!*  
Save the Children, tel: 0131 527 8200
- **Wales:**  
Crowley, Anne and Vulliamy, Cea (2002) *Listen up!*  
Save the Children, tel: 029 2039 6838

**Smacking** is wrong because: **it hurts; it's painful inside; people do it too hard; they could make you stop it by telling them in words; it makes people cry; you feel sort of as though you want to run away; it's bad manners; it feels embarrassed; it's nasty and you go in a huff; it's a bad thing to do; if it was an adult like my daddy, he can smack very hard; it might stop your blood for a few minutes; it could hurt the bones; if they're very little, they might think it's right to smack and go off and smack somebody else; you could damage something; you might get a bruise or a lump; children scream and cry on their bed; it's horrible; you might feel very poorly; no-one should smack anyone; it stings; you may have done something by accident; every time you get smacked it hurts your feelings; it feels like someone banged you with a hammer; drips come out of your eyes; you might fall; it makes you unhappy; it sets a wrong example; they hit you on the head where they're not supposed to; children get a sad face; you cry and you're miserable; it hurts your feelings inside.**

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