

Speech by Dr Penelope Leach for the CAU! NI Event with NICCY, held in Belfast on 4 February 2010. Entitled 'Tips and Hints for Positive Parenting' Dr Leach was the keynote speaker.

Good evening everybody.

It's very nice to be here and to see you all at an event that's so close to my heart. I've been involved with the organisation called Children are Unbeatable for more than 20 years. When we started it, in 1988, it was called End Physical Punishment of Children – or EPOCH. We started it then because the Society of Teachers Opposed to Corporal Punishment (STOPP) had finally succeeded in having corporal punishment in schools made illegal, and there were a few pounds left in the campaign bank account. And, since the STOPP campaign had made a lot of people aware of the issues around hitting children in school, it seemed the right moment to try and spread that awareness from no more teachers hitting children in schools to no more parents or carers hitting children at home.

For reasons you'll see as I go on, I'm anxious to emphasise that the aim then, and the aim now, is not to reduce the severity of physical punishments – to get rid of those wooden spoons on the back of kitchen doors – as a matter of child welfare but to end the physical punishment of children altogether and everywhere as a matter of children's rights.

The UK, like most of the nations of the world (with the exception of the US), formally recognised children's equal right with adults to protection from physical and mental violence when it ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1989. That right is now not only recognised but actually upheld for most children in institutional settings, including schools, and in foster care, but it is contravened daily in the millions of homes where despite the repeated efforts of the Committee of the UNCRC as outlined on the slide, children are still smacked or otherwise physically punished. Despite rising concern about the levels of violence in society as a whole, and especially about domestic violence, defined as violence between adult marital or sexual partners, violence to children by parents is still socially acceptable to many people if it is used in the name of discipline, and comes within the bounds of 'reasonable chastisement' sanctioned by law.

A major study, funded by the Department of Health, produced the first reliable research findings in 1995. They suggested that 91% of children had been hit and almost one in six had experienced 'severe punishment' by a parent. Three quarters of the one-year-olds had already been smacked. Of course many of those punishments are "little smacks" and some people justify them as being "loving". But however minor the pain and good the motive, violence to children can never be justified, and physical punishment is also important as a symbol of adult society's disrespectful and discriminatory attitudes to children and misuse of punitive power over them.

Over the last twenty years human rights bodies have called upon successive UK governments to ban physical punishment and so have all the major charities, in England Scotland and Ireland, concerned with child protection and with children's well being. In fact campaigning for CAU within the UK has sometimes felt a bit like beating your head against a stone wall because no government will address the issue head-on with a

free vote. Instead of outlawing all physical punishment – which would undoubtedly make them unpopular with some people - governments have tried to identify and outlaw the most extreme forms of it, leaving “reasonable punishment” or “reasonable chastisement” within the law, hoping thereby to please everybody.

What’s wrong with the concept of “reasonable punishment”? Not just the difficulties of deciding what’s reasonable - when and why, but the fact that it entrenches, in law, the idea that ANY physical punishment is reasonable – and acceptable. Of course measures to minimise the violence that may legally be done to children, and the pain they suffer, sound desirable and it has sometimes been quite difficult for CAU campaigners to explain why they don’t support such measures. But in fact attempts to limit where, with what and how hard children may be hit if a punishing parent who is reported to the Police or to child protection is to rely on the defence of “reasonable chastisement” sound enormously much better than they are.

In the Children Act of 2004, section 58 was supposed to outlaw any action by punishing parents that breaches a child’s rights under section 3 of the UNCRC. In reality, though, Section 58 does no such thing. It allows parents to use the defence of reasonable punishment for common assaults on children because, the government argues, *“Ill treatment must attain a minimum level of severity to fall within article 3 and conduct charged as common assault would not attain this level of severity”* Unfortunately things that punishing parents do that certainly come under Article 3 yet are called “common assaults” because they do not cause actual bodily harm. Think of blows to the head which don’t cause serious injury but might; frequent common assaults that keep a child in daily fear; heavy blows to children whose skin doesn’t show bruising; physical punishments that cause pain but not injury – eating hot peppers; standing in stress positions; punishments that degrade but don’t injure – adolescent spanked on naked bottom or in public.

The government maintains – to the voters and to the Committee on the Rights of the Child – that the degree and intensity of physical punishment that a parent may legally justify has been modified, but parents can still beat their children every day yet shelter from prosecution behind the bulwark of “reasonable chastisement”.

Since the Children Act was passed, many parliamentary attempts have been made to reform the law both in England, and in Northern Ireland where the legal situation is similar but not identical. But if the struggle for reform continues in the UK, the years of campaigning have clearly been worthwhile because of its enormous success in calling attention to the issue and changing laws worldwide. It is worth noting that while the UK and the USA are both missing from the list of countries that have prohibited all physical punishment, the United States of America – which did not sign the UNCRC – is only very slowly struggling towards ending corporal punishment in schools and there is as yet no active movement to ban it by parents in the home.

However, the UK, one of the first countries (after Sweden) to ban corporal punishment in schools and to campaign against physical punishment at home and everywhere, is one of the last to abolish it. I wonder why? Clearly successive governments have successfully used parents’ rights (to treat their children as they think best) to filibuster over children’s

rights (to equal protection from physical assault) But is the right to hit their children really so precious to many parents in the UK that abolition would lose the government votes? It's difficult to tell not only because no recent research has been carried out into parents' attitudes to physical punishment, but also because almost nothing has been done to make parents aware of where the law actually stands since the Children Act of 2004 and its Section 58. When the government reviewed section 58 it asked: *"To what extent is the legal position on the physical punishment of children widely understood...?"* More than ¾ of respondents said it was ill understood and confusing.

Scotland and Northern Ireland have made more, and more effective attempts than England and Wales to explain the law to parents, but they still have not done well. Northern Ireland's "Top tips for parents: your guide to positive parenting" has only two mentions of physical punishment and both are confusing. E.g. *"you do not have a right to physically punish your child and you should therefore consider other methods such as positive parenting"* suggests that physical punishment is on a par with, but opposite to positive parenting. The Northern Ireland Department of Health's booklet "Safe Parenting Handbook", published in 2007 uses the same text. Unfortunately it has a page on temper tantrums, which does not advise against smacking. Furthermore it is not this new version but an older one which is on the website of a number of English local safeguarding children boards. This version uses outdated headings such as *"Smacking- the great debate"* and contains many phrases such as *"when self discipline is taught smacking becomes unnecessary"* that reinforce the idea that until they achieve self discipline hitting children is an acceptable part of parenting.

Abolition of physical punishment is a children's rights issue, and that's the context in which I've talked about it so far. But physical punishment is also a parenting issue. Teaching children how to behave – which is the real meaning of the word "discipline" - is an important part of parenting and although parents usually think of discipline as something done to children, it's actually for them too. Your baby may not like you stopping him touching the light or the fire, but he'd like getting burned even less, wouldn't he? And wouldn't it be unkind, not to help your three year-old discover that the other children are more likely to let her play if she asks and shares rather than pushes and grabs?

Many people also get confused between discipline and punishment. That's unfortunate because punishment – physical or not - has no part in the only kind of discipline that's really worthwhile: namely self-discipline. The outside kind of discipline that tells children what to do, makes sure they "do as they are told " and punishes them when they disobey, may keep a class of eight year olds in order while their teacher is in the room but it can't keep them on the straight and narrow when they're on their own, with no adult to tell them.

Good discipline is less about doing as you're told than about understanding what you're told and much less about being forced to do it than about wanting to. Of course it's convenient and trouble-saving if children obey the thousand and one (often trivial) do's and don'ts adults shower over them, (about 46 per hour to the average two year old according to recent research) but in the long run it matters much more that they

understand the Why's: the handful of important principles all those instructions come from. It is those few but vital principles that children gradually take inside themselves as their own understanding of "right and wrong"; those principles that they will one day use, as part of what we call 'conscience', to tell themselves what they should and should not do.

No child is born 'good' - or 'bad' but from birth their parents, or other adults who look after them, matter to them more than anything else so from the very beginning they are learning how to behave by watching and imitating them. The long route to self-discipline starts with Family Show and Tell. It rests on the positive force of the interested, loving relationship between children and parents, assuming that they want to behave as they should; showing them how and ensuring that they have a nicer time when they do well so they'll do the same next time. That's very different from external discipline that relies on the negative force of the power parents have over children; assumes that they have to be forced to behave well; waits for them to do wrong and then punishes them so they'll do something different next time. A lot of people think discipline means punishment and punishment means hurting and humiliating children but only negative discipline relies on punishment, and physical punishments like smacking or spanking children, or locking or tying them up, are the most negative of all.

Positive discipline focuses on good behaviour; decides what it is (we often forget that one); makes sure children understand what it is and why; expects it; rewards children for it and hopes that will motivate them to keep on. **Negative discipline focuses on bad behaviour,** decides what it is; expects it, watches out for it; punishes children for it and hopes that will motivate them to do the opposite.

Positive discipline takes account of children's as well as adults' feelings: encouraging children to take as much responsibility for their own behaviour as they are able; keeping track of children's development and changing abilities so it neither asks so much that a child is certain to fail, nor so little that he cannot be proud of success; allowing children to share decisions about discipline as they get old enough. **Positive discipline has self-discipline as its aim** so that "doing as you know you should" is always preferred to simply "doing as you are told". **Positive discipline is a big part of positive parenting** - in fact if your parenting is positive, your discipline can't be negative, and if your discipline is negative you aren't really a positive parent. The more positive you can be with your children the less tension there'll be in your home and the closer you'll all feel to each other. And while positive discipline isn't exactly an easy option, it works so much better than the negative kind that you won't find yourself choosing between nagging (which makes you feel helpless) and smacking (which makes you feel horrible).

Here are some basics to get you started towards being positive, or to get you talking with your partner, your mother or a friend, about being positive

Your children are people just like you - except they're younger and smaller so they don't know and can't do as much. If you ever wonder how to treat a child; how to react to something he's done or something she's said, ask yourself how you'd have liked your mum or dad to treat you under those circumstances when you were little, or how you'd like to be treated now.

Do As You Would Be Done By, Don't expect to get (much) more politeness or helpfulness, smiles or hugs, than you give, or (much) less bad language and rough stuff.

Your children are never your enemies. The crying baby, the tantruming toddler or the cheeky child who may sometimes wind you up, never intends to hurt you.

You don't have to earn your children's affection or respect. You already have it. Although they may develop a more critical eye as they approach puberty, young children can't imagine any mother or father than the ones they've got. As far as they are concerned you're perfect.

Physical punishments can't teach children to behave: They make children much too angry to be sorry for what they've done. They don't tell children what they should have done instead. They don't show children how they can put things right.

What's more: **Physical punishments can be dangerous:** even a gentle smack can catch a child off balance and a boxed ear or a shaking can do permanent damage. **Physical punishments easily escalate:** If a toddler's had a 'little smack' for touching the TV, pushing the buttons again may get him a bigger one. **Physical punishments set children a really terrible example:** if you use your superior size and strength to get your way by force, they're bound to think that's acceptable behaviour for them, too. In fact children who've been smacked a lot are often violent to smaller children or to animals. We call it the "kick the cat syndrome"

Sometimes parents who do smack their children but are thinking about giving it up ask what they can do instead, but the alternative to smacking isn't a new kind of punishment but a new kind of approach aimed at making children want to do what you want them to do. Once you've begun to be positive with your children and they've started to respond, you probably won't find you need formal punishments that are meant to make children pay for what they've done ["No TV because you were cheeky"] If your children get punished at all, it will be by the result of their own actions ["You've missed that TV programme because you wouldn't come in"]; often by making you cross - [" That's it! We shan't buy lollies from this ice cream van after all because I'm not standing in the queue for one more minute with you two squabbling..."].

Just as children get punished by the results of their own actions so they get 'rewarded' by the genuine results of their own actions, often by pleasing you and putting you in a good mood - ["we got through the checkout in double quick time with you unloading the trolley: let's go and have a coffee..."] A 'reward' tells your child 'I love you/ approve of you/appreciate you/ like being with you'. Practical 'rewards' like sweets or money or extra TV time can convey those messages, but so can smiles and hugs and praise and thanks. That kind of 'reward' is the positive way to go. In fact the real alternative to punishing children who do wrong so that they feel bad, is rewarding children who do right so that they feel good.

In fact I'd like to suggest that a good rule-of-thumb is: "If you want children to be good, make them feel good" If you want a child to behave in a more grownup way, don't make him feel babyish or naughty; it's feeling grownup and competent that will make him feel able to become so. Whatever the issue - toilet training or table manners, learning to read or learning to swim, being a bully or being bullied - making children feel good works far better than making them feel bad. The same applies even to older children and

to those who have definitely been 'bad': humiliating a child who is caught cheating in a test or exam almost guarantees that she will continue to cheat even if she takes more trouble not to be caught. Help her take pride in what she can honestly do, and she will not need to cheat.

If small children could have their way they'd mostly have their parents attention all the time and all to themselves. They can't have their way, of course, but the more strictly the attention they can have is rationed, the more they want it and the less they care what kind it is. Your toddler who's holding up her arms to you and saying "uppy-uppy Mum, uppy", would like you to pick her up and give her a hug, but if you try to ignore her because you're in the middle of cooking tea, she'll start whingeing. She'd rather you scolded her for whingeing than ignored her. In fact if your small children are like most small children, they'd rather anything than be ignored. That makes parent's attention a powerful force in family life but not one that most of us use positively. Children want our attention so it stands to reason that attention is a reward and being ignored is a punishment. But do children get more attention when they behave well or when they behave badly?

A lot of busy parents and care workers and teachers operate on a sort of "let sleeping dogs lie" principle, ignoring children when they are no trouble and paying attention when they have to. Which child gets attention and a packet of sweets in the supermarket check-out queue? Not the child who is peacefully sucking her thumb but the one who is playing up and embarrassing her mother. And which children will adults talk to and hold hands with on an outing from nursery or school? Not the sensible, cooperative children, but the ones who can't be trusted to stay safe unless somebody keeps warning and grabbing. Used in that way attention rewards children for being a pain instead of for being a pleasure, and it often leaves children who are being "good" wondering what they have to do to get their share. If you redistribute your attention from children who are being "naughty" to children who are being "good", you can save time on scolding and spend it on praising. What happens to the child who expected to get scolded? Nothing: he gets ignored. It doesn't always work, of course, because you can't ignore all bad behaviour, but every little helps.

Sometimes when we're talking about attention parents say things like: *"Surely 'virtue is its own reward'?" Surely children shouldn't need special attention just for behaving as they should? In fact surely they shouldn't have too much attention altogether in case they get spoiled? "* That's a sad misunderstanding. "Spoiling" isn't about willingly giving children attention or even indulgence and fun, spoiling is about children bullying and blackmailing you so you give in when you aren't willing. You can't spoil children with too much talk, play and laughter; too many smiles and hugs, or even too many presents, provided you give them because you want to. Your child will not get spoiled because you buy sweets in the supermarket or fifteen birthday gifts. But he may get spoiled if he learns that he can blackmail you into reversing a "no sweets" decision by throwing a tantrum in public, or get anything he wants out of you if he goes on and on and on. Children don't get spoiled if adults have the courage of their convictions. In fact being the adult in a family - or classroom - means being the one who listens while everyone has a say, but finally decides where the limits are.

Limits are not just something adults impose on children. We all have to observe certain limits because they mark out our space from other people's. You can buy any car you can afford but where and how you drive it is limited. Children need additional limits, laid down by parents and carers, to keep them safe while they learn to keep themselves safe; to control them while they develop self-control, and to make sure they don't lose their own space or trespass on other people's while they learn vital lessons for socialised living like "do as you would be done by". Limits are a positive part of children's lives and their freedom because limits help children to be safe and approved of by adults. Of course limits seem negative to children if we wait for them to break them and then dish out punishment. But then limits are only limits if children cannot break them. So the moral of the tale is "Don't set a limit if you don't intend to do whatever it takes to keep it secure." And the comfort in it is that you always can.

Yes, parents always can keep pre-adolescent children within boundaries if they themselves are prepared to reinforce them however boring it may be. The truth is that boredom for parents accounts for a lot of the trouble over discipline: here are some of the "limits" parents have told me they couldn't enforce on their children. Couldn't?

"Time for a three year old to come out of the pool..." Couldn't the father go in and carry him out? Boring, if he's already got dressed, but possible.

A six year old who promised to be good disrupting a wedding service by talking - loudly." She couldn't disrupt the service if her mother took her out the minute she began to talk, could she? Sad to miss the ceremony, of course, but better than spoiling it for everyone else or staying away altogether.

"Stay upstairs once you've been put to bed for the night" There's nothing more charming than a small person in pyjamas asking to be made welcome, but if bedtime is the limit, back to bed is where he instantly has to be taken and if he always is, he will give up. When will he give up? Sometimes between tomorrow and next month.

If you aren't sure it's going to be worth your while to enforce a boundary, don't set it - even if your mother-in-law says you should. You're the ones who have to take that toddler back upstairs every five minutes after all.

While you keep children safe and protect others from them, you are teaching them to keep themselves safe and to care for other people. While you control their behaviour, you are helping them to control themselves. And while you explain the big moral issues - like honesty, justice or respect for others - that lie behind your everyday discipline, you are offering your own value-system to your children so that they can take your values in, test them out in adolescence, reject some, maybe, and make the rest part of their own value-system in adulthood.

Negative discipline with its smacks and humiliations; its illogical punishments, tearful time-outs and broken boundaries, cannot do all that, but you can. Positive discipline isn't easy, but it's no more difficult than the negative kind and it's far more effective and more fun.

Lots to gain and nothing to lose.