



To Smack or Not to Smack?

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Position Paper

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The issue of physical punishment is a particularly controversial one at the moment as child advocates are engaged in a struggle to persuade the New Zealand government to repeal a defence in law (section 59 of the 1961 *Crimes Act*) which justifies parents hitting their children provided the force used is 'reasonable in the circumstances.'

Debate about physical punishment of children became very public in New Zealand in 2000, when attention was again drawn to the issue by a number of very public child abuse cases, and by media attention which accompanied the second government report to the United Nations (UN) committee that monitors countries' compliance with the *Convention on the rights of the child* of the child (United Nations, 1989).

Currently, a persuasive voice from a more conservative generation clamours to be heard: "But it didn't do me any harm – or my kids". The "spare the rod, and spoil the child" contingent is powerful and persuasive. 'Why should the state intervene in something as personal as the way I bring up my children?,' argues this collective voice.

The use of physical punishment is deeply embedded in our culture and history. Russell and Wood (2001) state, 'physical punishment has been a long-standing tradition in European and other cultures, and is not readily abandoned. It is still popular in New Zealand, although attitudes are changing.' (p. 1).

The most persuasive argument to support anti-smacking law changes to section 59 of the *Crimes Act* (1961) is that research shows that while smacking might reduce unwanted behaviours in the immediate or short term, as a long term strategy for positive and permanent behaviour change it is simply not effective, and more importantly, it can be harmful (Gershoff, 2002; Holden, 2002).

There is substantial research showing that both moderate and severe physical punishment is damaging, and can lead to an increase in violent behaviours, criminality and mental illness (Leach, 1999).

Particularly concerning in New Zealand is the high child abuse and death from abuse statistics: high youth suicide rates, and high reported rates of bullying in schools compared with other countries. Smith (2005) states that the use of corporal punishment as a method of family discipline is a definite health risk for children. 'The more children experience corporal punishment and the more frequent and severe it is, the more they are at risk of problems such as aggression or depression' (Smith, 2005, p. 14).

Smacking is not a good teaching technique; it merely suppresses the problem behaviour (for the purpose of avoiding pain or fear), often breeds resentment, fear or anger in the child, and does not replace the problem behaviour with an appropriate alternative (Holden, 2002; Holden, Miller & Harris 1999). Ritchie and Ritchie (1981) in their book *Spare the Rod*, an in-depth study of New Zealand parenting attitudes and practices at that time, argue, 'The punisher is offering the child both the motive to punish someone else (to displace the anger), and a model for doing so' (p. 54). They add that adults justify hitting children by saying it will teach them a lesson, but it actually teaches them the lesson that parents are powerful and can hurt you, which may not be the lesson the parents intended. They believe that although people often assert that aroused emotional states may increase the desire to learn or make children more anxious to please, anger and fear actually interfere with learning, making it less efficient, and reducing the chances of remembering or establishing behaviour patterns.

In response to the assertion that 'it never did me any harm', we have an increasingly violent society which tolerates – and even sanctions – many forms of violence. Research suggests that there is a definite link between the frequency of physical discipline received as a child and later aggressive acts, and this violence certainly harms many innocent people. Evidence shows that one of the most common predictors of severe behaviour problems in school children is a history of "good hidings" in the home (Roguski, 2004).

In answer to the argument that 'spanking works', I would argue that what "works" is not the smack, but the displeasure and disapproval conveyed loud and clear – usually both verbally and via body language – by the person the child usually reveres most in life. Possibly in a loving home where a smack was a rare response to serious misdemeanour, and there were explanations and forgiveness following, not much lasting personal harm was done. However, the practice demonstrates double standards and conveys mixed messages.

Smacking implies that it is legitimate for big people (“grown-ups”) to hit smaller people (children), but not vice versa. Employers cannot hit their employees when they are displeased with them, teachers cannot hit pupils, or husbands their wives, without possibly going to court. Somehow, however it is considered valid for caregivers to hit their children because, supposedly, ‘it’s good for them’ (Saunders & Goddard, 1999). This attitude is a throwback to a bygone era when children were regarded as chattels, not as people with rights.

Today an increasing number of New Zealand parents express disquiet about hitting their children, whom they vehemently protect in all other spheres of life. Russell and Wood (2001) conducted a study of parents who had chosen not to smack, and investigated factors which influenced their decision. These factors included: personal childhood experiences, lack of fairness or effectiveness, not wanting their children to be afraid of them, a belief that alternatives were more efficacious and more acceptable, and a concern about trusting themselves not to injure when angry.

Gough and Reavy (1997) found that despite its popularity, many parents report that smacking is ineffective, and that they smack more to relieve their stress and frustration than to influence a child’s behaviour. While many smacks are impulsive reactions made in anger, and later regretted, sadly there are also a few who derive pleasure from venting their frustration or anger on a child because of the immediate release of tension, and the satisfying sense of power and control. A very small number go on to cause injury or worse to their protégé. Ritchie and Ritchie (1981) argue that, ‘physical punishment is really very addictive – the more you use it the more it will be necessary to use it’ (p. 50).

The state has a responsibility to protect these vulnerable children. Increasingly, the media is reporting cases of babies and children being hospitalised and sometimes killed following physical abuse. However, as mentioned above, the law as it stands legitimises physical force against young people.

Two years ago a woman who hit her son with a horse whip and a bamboo cane was acquitted of assault when she appeared in a Timaru court (*New Zealand Herald*, 2005). Four years ago, a Ngaruawahia man who beat his 12-year-old daughter with a hose-pipe, raising a lump on her back, was acquitted of the same offence in Hamilton (*New Zealand Herald*, 2001). Earlier the same year, a Havelock North father who hit his 8-year-old son so hard with a piece of kindling that bruises were still visible on his buttocks days later was acquitted of assault (*The Dominion*, 2001).

It is that section of the act that Green MP Sue Bradford is trying to repeal with a members’ bill that cleared its first parliamentary hurdle by 65 votes to 54 last July. If passed into law, the Crimes Amendment Bill will remove reasonable force as a legitimate defence for caregivers charged with assault.

‘What will we be left with that works if smacking is outlawed?’ anxious caregivers ask. The most effective discipline package is like a house of bricks, rather than one of straw or sticks.

The foundations are a mix of love and respect (as opposed to fear, power and control). This naturally develops as a result of unconditional love (selfless love which demands nothing in return), consistent nurturing care, and personal integrity. Role-modelling, and teaching children strategies such as problem-solving and communication skills are far more constructive and conducive to love and respect than smacking.

To develop the analogy, the brick walls of the house are an amalgam of responsible parental authority and consistency. Caregivers need to take charge and learn to “wear the pants”. Children will soon learn to sense the resolve that means ‘I mean what I say, and I’ll take no nonsense’. If built on a foundation of love and respect, children will not lightly challenge just authority, or incur displeasure. However, without that base of love, an unremitting authoritarian approach can breed resentment, rebellion and anger (Graziano, Hamblen & Plante, 1996; Holden, 2002). A thick layer of positive regard must underlie the “firm and fair” bricks.

A rich schedule of positive reinforcement for desirable behaviour cements the bricks. Sometimes caregivers, like school teachers, have to actively search for positive behaviour (particularly when tired or stressed), as biologically/genetically humans are programmed to ignore positives and attend to negatives (for purposes of survival). Positive reinforcement can take many forms: praise, hugs, privileges, treats, responsibilities, celebrations. One of the most precious positive reinforcers is quality parental time spent with a child (especially in play and through fun times).

The roof of the parenting discipline structure is comprised of consistent, predictable, appropriate negative consequences, enforced without shouting or physical force. Such consequences are an integral part of the teaching process which is central to pro-active discipline. These can include withdrawal of attention (the time-honoured time-out procedure falls into this category), reduced privileges (for example, limits on TV time or going out to play with friends), and allowing natural or logical consequences to follow inappropriate behaviour. For example, no pudding is given if the excuse for not eating one’s meat and vegetables is, ‘I’m too full’. In an ideal world, as parents, teachers or employers, it would be preferable to not employ any aversive or coercive strategies, but practicality – and common sense – suggests that a mixture of many positive and some reasonable negative consequences (that is, age-appropriate and time-limited) is realistic.

Teaching is the key, and role-modelling, and helping children learn strategies such as problem-solving and communication skills are far more constructive and conducive to love and respect than smacking. Offering choices to children (for example, ‘bath before or after tea – you choose’) allows them some control, and a chance to develop responsibility in day to day affairs. The root of the word “discipline”, in fact, means “to teach”.

Caregivers, who sometimes forget that they have the ultimate authority in shaping their children’s development, do not always realise that they hold most of the resources: wisdom and experience, material possessions, money and power.

They must exercise the right to use these wisely in the loving discipline of their children. Certainly caregivers are not left powerless by the possible removal of smacking as an acceptable disciplinary strategy. Confidence in being a caregiver who is in charge, and possesses a range of respectful parenting strategies, in turn develops security and contentment in children.

Russell and Wood (2001) believe that changing attitudes and behaviour about the use of smacking has three dimensions. These are legal reform to acknowledge children's rights and set a clear standard of parent behaviour in law; parent education about effective child rearing practices, and available supportive social services, particularly for parents under stress. I believe that educational professionals who interface with parents have a special opportunity and responsibility to be an integral part of this process of support and re-education.

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