

SMACKING CHILDREN

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It is sobering to contemplate that in democracies, there are restrictions on how prison guards can treat inmates (who, it could be argued, have *demonstrated* antisocial proclivities) and yet few countries limit the physical assault of innocents (children) by their parents, unless injury results.

In countries where it is not illegal, smacking or spanking is still practised by the majority of parents: in the U.S., over one-third of children (babies!) under one year of age are hit by their parents, including being shaken (which, at that young an age can be fatal). Smacking reaches a peak of 94 per cent for three- to five-year olds, who are hit up to three times a week (Deater-Deckard & Dodge 1997; Larzelere 2000). That is 150 assaults a year! If an adult were assaulted that often, criminal charges would be laid.

While prevalence decreases with the children's ages, 30 per cent of parents of adolescents are still hitting them, on an average of six times a year, with these figures likely to be a significant under-estimation. Spanking is most prevalent in less educated, young, impoverished, rural and Protestant parents – but nevertheless is extremely common across all sectors of the community.

This paper examines the evidence about this practice. Its disadvantages centre on their limited ability to ensure even immediate compliance, its negative effects on children's emotional wellbeing, and the damage that it causes to the parent-child relationship.

EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

When studies focus on young children with clinical levels of disruptive behaviour, infrequent mild physical punishment accompanied by reasoning achieves improved short-term compliance and reduced aggression. However, more typical children experience no positive benefits and only harmful effects, particularly when aged over six years, when subjected to frequent use (one to three times a week) at any age (Eamon 2001; Larzelere 2000) and when children are inhibited or fearful by nature (Colder et al. 1997). Detrimental outcomes are most pronounced for frequent and severe physical punishment (Afifi et al. 2006; Fergusson & Lynskey 1997; Straus et al. 1997).

In the long term, this form of punishment has negative effects on all domains of children's functioning.

- *Behavioural* effects of physical punishment include increased aggression and escalating defiance and antisocial acts during childhood and adolescence (Aucoin et al. 2006; Colder et al. 1997; Côté et al. 2006; Eamon 2001; Gershoff 2002; Larzelere 2000; McCord 1997; Nelson et al. 2006; Straus et al. 1997) and into adulthood (Afifi et al. 2006).
- *Morally*, physically punished children comply simply to avoid consequences and thus fail to develop an internal locus of causality.

This results in impaired conscience development, or the failure to internalise parents' values (Gershoff 2002).

- Children subjected to physical punishment show impairments in *social skills* such as social problem solving, with lowered peer acceptance and increased peer dislike. These effects probably come about because their experience of a hostile relationship with their controlling parents causes children to develop similarly negative expectations of peers (Domitrovich & Bierman 2001).
- Physically punished children show diminished *connectedness* to and trust in punitive adults (Bender et al. 2007; Gershoff 2002). In other words, even when *individuals* show resilience, punishment damages *relationships*.
- At the time, like all forms of punishment, smacking will produce *emotional distress* such as fear of loss of adult approval, anger, humiliation, guilt and sadness (Holden 2002). These emotions are likely, in turn, to block any cognitive appreciation by the child of the message behind the discipline (Holden 2002). In the longer term, many physically punished children experience low self-esteem, anxiety and depression and, in adulthood, alcohol dependency (Afifi et al. 2006; Aucoin et al. 2006; Bender et al. 2007; Colder et al. 1997; Eamon 2001; Larzelere 2000; MacMillan et al. 1999; Nelson et al. 2006; Smith 2004). Even when physical discipline is culturally normative, it still reduces children's emotional adjustment and increases their levels of social aggression, albeit to a lesser extent than occurs when the parenting practice is less well accepted culturally (Lansford et al. 2005).
- *Developmental* impairments, such as reduced IQ (Smith & Brooks-Gunn 1997) and language comprehension (Gest et al. 2004), probably arise because parents employing corporal punishment use less reasoning when disciplining.

Even where these detrimental effects cannot be demonstrated, no beneficial effects can be proven either (Lytton 1997). The only positive result ever found has been increased compliance. However, this is a dubious achievement because, as already mentioned, it does not teach children moral reasoning or encourage independent thinking (Bear et al. 2003; Covalenskie 1992; McCaslin & Good 1992; Wien 2004). Furthermore, where smacking achieves compliance, this is evidence that the children are amenable, and therefore that lesser methods would be equally if not more effective. In other words, it is unnecessary.

Moreover, even behaviourists conclude that punishment is effective for the 95 per cent of children who are mainly cooperative and therefore would respond to lesser methods while, for the remainder who have entrenched antisocial behaviour, punishment seldom works (Eslea 1999; Maag 2001). Its disadvantages far outweigh its gains in compliance and, other than signalling who is in charge, it fails to promote any lasting behavioural improvements (Wheeler & Richey 2005).

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Smacking seldom produces physical injury, but in the hands of parents who are easily angered, smacking can escalate to the point where injury results. Parents who are easily angered, who were subjected themselves to harsh discipline or abuse in childhood, who are enduring high levels of economic stress and who have little knowledge about normal behaviour and about parenting strategies are more prone to injuring their children (Nix et al. 1999). These parents employ harsh or violent parenting in frustration at their children's inability to comply with developmentally inappropriate expectations (Dixon et al. 2005; Frias-Armenta 2002; Mapp 2006; Nix et al. 1999). In other words, physical abuse commonly is the result of the escalation of 'normal' disciplinary encounters – that is, smacking. Children aged under five years are more vulnerable to physical injury than are older children, and this is the group who is most often smacked.

CONCLUSION

The concept that it is acceptable to hit children (who are defenceless) is based on two assumptions, both historical and both questionable. The first is that you cannot reason with children. This ancient view assumes that children are 'naughty' by nature and that, therefore, parents are justified in using physical force to correct their evil tendencies.

The second assumption is that discipline means making children comply with adult instructions. However, compliance does not teach children moral reasoning and leads to less considerate behaviour once children are no longer under adult supervision. Instead, we need to teach children to consider other people. We teach this by demonstrating considerateness. Given that smacking considers only the adult's needs and not the child's, it fails to demonstrate the caring stance that we would want children to emulate.

FURTHER READING

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.
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