

Physical punishment of children: effects and evolution

In New Zealand the debate about physical discipline of children has been heated and prolonged and continues even after law change. Despite problematic research issues there is convincing evidence of the damaging effects of moderate and harsh physical discipline on children's development. Yet the use of physical discipline is still sometimes advocated and still employed by some parents. This presentation reviews the evidence against the use of physical discipline and examines the components of strategies to reduce its use.

Introduction

I shall begin my presentation with a short story.

In 1978, Astrid Lindgren (author of the Pippi Longstocking children's books) received the German Book Trade Peace Prize for her literary contributions. In acceptance, she told the following story.

"When I was about 20 years old, I met an old pastor's wife who told me that when she was young and had her first child, she didn't believe in striking children, although spanking kids with a switch pulled from a tree was standard punishment at the time. But one day when her son was four or five, he did something that she felt warranted a spanking - the first of his life. And she told him that he would have to go outside and find a switch for her to hit him with. The boy was gone a long time. And when he came back in, he was crying. He said to her, "Mama, I couldn't find a switch, but here's a rock that you can throw at me."

All of a sudden the mother understood how the situation felt from the child's point of view: that if my mother wants to hurt me, then it makes no difference what she does it with; she might as well do it with a stone. And the mother took the boy onto her lap and they both cried. Then she laid the rock on a shelf in the kitchen to remind herself forever: never violence. And that is something I think everyone should keep in mind. Because violence begins in the nursery - one can raise children into violence."

*The author concluded, "I think that too often we fail to **feel** situations "from the child's point of view," and that failure leads us to teach our children other than what we **think** we're teaching them (1).*

My personal involvement in advocating against physical punishment of children and promoting related law change goes back at least 15 years. In part my convictions grew from being a social worker who saw parents indiscriminately and unimaginatively hit children. I saw angry, defiant, distressed children. As I learnt about human rights I came to believe children had a right to physical integrity like other human beings. For me then not hitting children it is matter of the heart more than a matter of the head.

I therefore preface my presentation with the fact that I find it is distasteful to have to dredge up evidence to demonstrate that hitting contributes to poor outcomes including offending. I am aware that there are some social science researchers in some parts of the world that have gone to some lengths to try to prove that physical punishment (usually of the milder variety) does not hurt children and may even benefit them (2).

In researching the effects of family discipline it is difficult to establish exactly what effects various adult behaviours have on children. There are problems establishing causal relationships taking into account confounding variables. There are limited outcome measures. And it is not ethical to do randomised controlled studies with one group of children being beaten and another not. Professor Anne Smith and her team gave an excellent summary of methodological issues in the book *The Discipline and Guidance of Children: Messages from Research* (3).

I am not a social scientist so beyond acknowledging these difficulties exist, I do not intend to try to unravel them but will now simply to share summaries of some research findings.

Elizabeth Gershoff in a review and meta-analysis of the research literature on corporal punishment summarises the findings: *Ten of the 11 meta-analyses indicate parental corporal punishment is associated with the following undesirable behaviours and experiences; decreased moral internalisation, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behaviour, decreased quality of relationship between parents and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behaviour, decreased adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. Corporal punishment was associated with only one desirable behaviour, namely increased immediate compliance* (4).

There is in fact a large amount of literature reporting on research into the effects of physical punishment. Professor Anne Smith and her colleagues reviewed much of this in *The Discipline and Guidance of Children; Messages from Research*. She concludes that research on the long term-effects of punishment is consistent, and overwhelmingly negative, over a wide variety of child development outcomes (5).

That could be said to sum it up. But let's look at the contentious issue of degree of violence involved in physical discipline and whether degree of violence makes a difference.

Physical punishment has been identified as a risk factor for child abuse including in a very recently published study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. The authors conclude that: *Although reported spanking increases the odds of reported physical abuse, the relationship between the reported hitting of a child with an object and reported abuse is much stronger* (6).

Professor David Fergusson, reporting on results from the Christchurch Health and Development Study says, *Evaluations of the relationship between reports of physical punishment or abuse during childhood and psychosocial outcomes in early adulthood clearly showed that young people reporting harsh or abusive treatment had increased rates of conduct problems, substance abuse, depression, anxiety and violent crime. There were, however, no clear differences between the adjustment of young people who reported that their parents never used physical punishment and those who reported that their parents infrequently used physical punishment* (7).

Findings such as these are not a surprise but, let's be very clear about this, they in no way justify the use of physical discipline. Such findings *are* sometimes put forward

to justify use of mild physical punishment because it may be effective in increasing immediate compliance and there is little evidence that it does children any harm. In my book a smack is a violent act. If someone strikes an adult woman, do we ask “Does it do her any harm?” Of course not. We assume that to some degree it is harmful emotionally and harmful of her relationship with the person hitting her. It is also an affront to the woman’s integrity. Yet this very question – “Does it do them any harm?” – is frequently asked in relation to hitting children.

But there is another reason to avoid defining the circumstances or degree of smacking that might be harmless. That is because it makes sense to try to shift the social norm around use of physical punishment in this country. It’s probably true that at the extreme end of the child abuse spectrum a shift in the social norm about hitting children may not make much difference. But at what point does physical punishment become abuse and at what point is a child developmentally damaged? I am convinced that many children who are hit would have better outcomes if they were not hit.

What do we know about how many children are hit? It’s not a clear picture.

In a retrospective study (The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study) 80% of 26 year olds reported receiving physical punishment at some time during childhood. Forty-five percent reported being hit with an object and 6% reported extreme physical punishment (8).

In 2005 the Ministry of Social Development sponsored a survey conducted by Gravitass. It included 612 parents and 539 caregivers with children aged five and under. Forty-nine percent said they had not smacked their children in the past 3 months or used physical discipline as a way to handle misbehaviour (9).

In the 2007 youth health survey participants were asked whether they had seen an adult hitting or physically hurting a child in their home (other than themselves) in the last 12 months. Approximately 17% of students had witnessed adults hitting or physically hurting a child in their home and many categorised the assault as severe (10).

In 2006/2007 as part of the New Zealand Health Survey primary caregivers were asked about their responses to child misbehaviour during the four weeks preceding a face to face interview with a researcher. They were shown a range of responses on a “show card”, one of these was “Physical Punishment, such as smacking”.

Physical punishment was one of the least common forms of discipline to have been used in the previous four weeks with children aged from birth to 14 years. One in ten children had experienced physical punishment in the previous four weeks. Children between two and four years of age were the most likely to experience physical punishment with one in five having experienced physical punishment by their caregivers in the previous four weeks. One in 14 children less than two years of age experienced physical punishment by their primary caregiver in the previous four weeks (11).

The results in the health survey are positive but the authors of the report cautioned that their method would undercount the use of physical punishment in the last four weeks because:

- Only the actions of the primary caregiver are counted, therefore excluding actions of other caregivers of the child.
- The primary caregiver may have forgotten.
- The caregiver may have failed to define some acts as physical punishment
- There may be social desirability bias or feelings of guilt.

And now we move to the evolution part of this presentation. Are attitudes and behaviour changing in Aotearoa New Zealand? A friend reported that recently a relative was visiting from the United States. She took her four children to a crowded shopping mall where one child was demanding, defiant and uncooperative. Before long he was soundly smacked by his mother. A number of bystanders said to the mother, "You can't do that here now".

The Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007 repealed the statutory defence of reasonable force for correction that had for so long been regarded as permission for parents to hit their children.

Awareness of New Zealand's law change is high. A UMR survey conducted for the Children's Commissioner in 2008 found that 91 percent of respondents were aware that the law about physical punishment of children was changed in 2007.

Respondents were also asked to rate their responses to the statement *There are certain circumstances when it is alright for parents to use physical punishment with a child*. The question was included because it was very similar to a question asked in the past by other researchers and therefore, provided a useful comparative measure of change over time.

In 1981, Jane Ritchie asked a sample of parents whether, *There are certain circumstances when it is all right for a parent to smack (or thrash) a child*. At that time 92 percent of men and 86 percent of women endorsed use of physical discipline for children in certain circumstances. In 1993, Dr Gabrielle Maxwell asked questions about physical punishment in a survey sponsored by the then Children's Commissioner, Dr Ian Hassall. At that time 87 percent of respondents thought that there were circumstances when it was all right for a parent to physically punish a child.

In 2008, 58 percent of respondents in the omnibus survey clearly agreed with the statement, indicating that physical punishment is still a popular form of discipline but the trend over time is going in the right direction (12).

The tradition of hitting children is deeply entrenched as is the belief that on the matter of discipline parents know best and have a right to treat their children as they wish, without interference from the state. We can't be sure that the law change or the prolonged debate that we have had in New Zealand about use of physical punishment with children has contributed to the trends indicated in the figures I have just provided. However the debate has undoubtedly caused some people to think about

the issue, and some even to change their minds. The law change is a critical component of a strategy to change attitudes about the use of physical punishment.

Another component of change is information. There is now a good range of positive parenting information available including material from the Government's SKIP initiative (Strategies with kids: information for parents). One component of the SKIP initiative provides funds for local projects, some of which use innovative, community-based approaches to changing attitudes and behaviour. Such projects utilise community development approaches and find ways of working with families that avoid relying on books, pamphlets and classes as these do not work for all parents (13).

It is very appropriate at a forum on *Addressing the Underlying Causes of Offending* that we are considering the contentious issue of physical punishment of children. New Zealand has had an enormous struggle to get as far as it has with this issue. Does the struggle and resistance to change tell us something about underlying attitudes and beliefs towards children, child rearing, violence and adult ownership of children? Do punishment, the infliction of pain and retribution really contribute positively to human development?

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