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**CHILDREN ARE UNBEATABLE!  
ENDING ALL PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OF CHILDREN IN EUROPE**

**BARCELONA, OCTOBER 1997**

**WORKING TOWARDS POSITIVE, NON-VIOLENT PARENTING AND CARING**

by  
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The physical punishment of children - hitting and humiliating them - is an iconic issue in children's rights and in non-violence. I know that; you know it; the beauty of a meeting like this is that everyone knows it. But whole societies will not change until every parent and childcare worker, as well as teacher, sees why "a little smack" or "a good spanking" really matters.

Work on that does not start from the same place in every country or culture, of course, and will not proceed at the same rate. Nevertheless the stages each campaign goes through seem similar enough that we can all learn from each others.

Initial reactions

When the End Physical Punishment Of Children campaign was founded, corporal punishment had just been banned from state-funded schools in the UK but the question of physical punishment in the home had not been publicly debated and no national organisation had a policy concerning it. With its long tradition of beating children, most parents and commentators initial reaction was incredulity: "You are surely not talking about ordinary smacking"? Anger followed: "How dare you suggest that there's any connection between what I do and child abuse?" "How dare you tell us what to do with our own children?"

Although anger about interference with parental power and autonomy remains easy to touch off, a decade's hard work has seen progress. Many parents - especially the younger ones who started families after the issue was made public, have ceased to take smacking for granted and are even ready to reject it if they are offered something to put in its place.

This is progress, but it is also dangerous because rejection, in the UK and North America at least, is mostly pragmatic rather than principled. Many parents are convinced that hitting children isn't an effective way to discipline them. We have to remember to state and to reiterate that hitting and humiliating children is not only ineffective, but also wrong. It is sometimes salutary to point out that it would be wrong even if it was effective.

## Alternatives to smacking.

When parents ask for alternatives to smacking they want and expect new weapons, new punishments. At this point, arguing against punitiveness - against all punishments that are other than the natural results of children's own actions - is usually counter productive. It serves only to confirm suspicions that no smacking means no discipline.

Of course there can be no pretence of valuing punishment: it has to be suggested that the best alternative to smacking isn't a new kind of punishment but a new kind of approach aimed at co-operation rather than enforcement; at making children want to do what you want them to do rather than making them do it whether they want to or not. But the points seems best made by demonstrating how, failing that co-operation, apparently non-violent punishments can become so. Time-Outs, for example, are often recommended and sometimes effective. A child is put by herself, on a special chair or in her room, for a certain number of minutes or until she stops misbehaving. In theory, there is no violence or humiliation and the child knows what she has done wrong, what she should have done instead, and how to put it right. But in practise the punishment may not work like that. If the child will not co-operate with a time-out it easily becomes a physical punishment. The parent tells the child 'go to your room'. If she says 'shan't', what is the parent to do? Carry her - by force, and maybe kicking and screaming? If the child is put in the room and comes straight out again what is the parent going to do? Hold the door? Lock the door?

The concept of a time out as a breathing space; a rest from stress; a moment to oneself, has a validity most of us recognise. I doubt there's anyone here who, feeling her temper rising, has not excused herself from a party to visit the ladies room - and cool down, get herself together and her polite manners mustered.

But if that is what time is for, why must it be imposed on children?

When my small son and I quarrelled, he used to fly from the room saying "I'm going to my room, so there" as if I was the one who was being isolated. Two or ten minutes later he would re-appear, charming; sometimes even apologetic. Audiences which accept that as time-out are ready for the concept of positive discipline!

The more positive discipline is presented as part of a complete attitudinal as well as practical package termed "Positive parenting" , the more acceptable it becomes. I have found that comparing and contrasting positive and negative discipline is an effective way to involve

parents, first in producing their own examples and later in "owning" the concept. For instance:

**Positive discipline focuses on good behaviour;** expects it; makes sure children understand what it is and why; rewards children for it and hopes that will motivate them to keep on.

**Negative discipline focuses on bad behaviour,** expects it, watches out for it; punishes children for it and hopes that will motivate them to do the opposite.

**Positive discipline encourages children to take as much responsibility** as they are able for their own behaviour.

It has self-discipline as its aim so that "doing as you know you should" is always preferred to simply "doing as you are told".

**Negative discipline keeps responsibility for decision-making** and the power to enforce decisions in the hands of adults, asking no more of children than to obey.

Working with parent educators and childcare workers is very different from working with parents, but equally important. These, after all, are often the people who will spearhead reform or prevent backsliding. And they are also the people whom parents trust to know about child care and compel children to spend much of their time with.

While increasing numbers are supporters of the campaign many in the UK are ambivalent. Over the last two years EPOCH has built up a list of their most-asked questions. These are the questions anyone who is going to speak publicly against the physical punishment of children needs to be prepared to answer. They are also questions that speakers can sometimes ask rhetorically to excellent effect:

**There are many kinds of punishment that hurt and humiliate children: why single out physical punishments, such as smacking?**

Children should be protected from all punitive violence, mental and emotional as well as physical. We do not seek the abolition of smacking, spanking and associated humiliation because it is the worst kind of punishment used on children but because it is the most visible and definable and the one that is most generally approved and used by parents and most often encouraged by other people. We've all heard passers by observe "what that child needs is a good smack" but who's every heard anyone say "what that child needs is really hurt feelings"?

Physical punishment is important in itself because violence to children can never be justified, but it is also important as a symbol of adult society's disrespectful and discriminatory attitudes to children and mis-use of punitive power over them.

**Bringing up children is a demanding job that's especially difficult now, with so much unemployment and so many mothers on their own. Is it fair to expect parents to give up smacking while things are so bad?**

The suggestion that it is unfair is based on three false assumptions:

Firstly: *Underprivileged parents smack more than other parents.* Research suggests otherwise. A lot of parents hit out at their children when they are feeling particularly stressed, but that is just as likely to be the stress of a high-powered job, a marriage that is crumbling or a step-relationship, as the stress of having no job or being a lone parent.

Secondly: *Giving up smacking makes looking after children more difficult.* Again, the evidence is that it does not. Smacking does not make it easy to produce well-disciplined children; on the contrary: treating children with respect tends to make them more respectful; using reason instead of violence makes them more reasonable and less violent, and reducing the disrespect and violence in a family makes it more comfortable for everybody.

Thirdly: *A decent life for parents comes before decent treatment for children.* The ideal is a decent life for everybody, but to suggest that nothing should be done to ensure respectful treatment for children until all adults live lives of dignity, is like suggesting that equal pay for women should wait on full employment for men.

**Surely it is legitimate to use physical punishment to teach children about everyday dangers like fires and roads?**

If a child is crawling towards a hot oven or running into a dangerous road, of course it is essential to use physical means to protect him or her - fast. Under any circumstances in which a child is in danger or endangering another child, it is legitimate to grab him even if you inadvertently cause pain; to pick her up even if she protests at being imprisoned.

But even under those circumstances it cannot be legitimate to hit a child because even as the adult hand is raised to deliver a blow, crucial seconds are being wasted and, when the hand lands, the hurt it delivers will distract the child from the lesson the adult means to teach about danger. And anyway, the hurt that hitting causes is not inadvertent....

**The physical punishment of children is part of the culture and child-rearing tradition of large minority groups. What right does the white majority have to impose abolition on them?**

The question reflects ethnic stereotypes rather than reality-based concerns. "Minority groups" do not share a childrearing ethos, any more than different groups of parents within the "ethnic majority" do. Some fundamentalist Christian groups, for example believe as strongly that it is right to whip children as Quakers believe it is wrong.

Historically, hitting children seems to be a white tradition, exported to many parts of the world with slavery and colonialism, both of which used corporal punishment as a means of control. No culture "owns" physical punishment: all cultures have a responsibility to disown it, as they have disowned other breaches of human rights which formed part of their traditions.

This is not a UK issue but a worldwide one. This is why the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child specifies that all its articles (including those that give children the right to protection from all forms of violence must apply to all children irrespective of culture, tradition, race or religion.

### **Parents have always smacked children. How can it suddenly have become wrong?**

Societies change. What is right - or acceptable or ignored - at a given time, does not necessarily remain so. Using physical force to assert the authority of one person over another is a clear example of that process of change. Little more than a century ago physical punishment was still part of many power- relationships. Courts could order floggings and so could officers in the armed forces; policemen could use violence towards suspects; men could hit not only apprentices and servants, but also wives. And almost any adult could hit almost any child. All that has changed, but not without protest. People objected to the first law against wife-beating in much the same terms that are now used against the idea of abolishing child-beating. They said it was an interference in the sacred privacy of the family. They said that no man would ever again be able to keep order in his household. They said that once wives knew that beating was forbidden, they would no longer respect their husbands.

In the UK (and many other countries) today, no adult has the right to hit another adult but many adults have the right to hit children. So the physical punishment of children has not "suddenly become wrong", but is a left-over from a whole batch of wrongs the rest of which have been put right; an anachronism.

**I'd have a lot of sympathy with a campaign to persuade parents not to hit or humiliate children, but why bring the law into it ?**

## An issue beyond logical argument

Whether they are addressed to parents or to educators and childcare professionals, these sensible, reasonable answers beg the real questions which are deeply personal and to do with power and control.

Parents say that the main reason they hit their children is to teach them about danger, but at a deeper level it is to remind those children that the parent is boss and to protect themselves from the danger of losing control.

Physical punishment is symbolic of the power imbalance between adults and children and it is that, far more than "good discipline" which is at stake when it is ended.

That is why the physical punishment of children remains, and should remain an issue of children's rights rather than childcare; of principle rather than pragmatics.

Progress depends on marrying those two. Showing people that the opposite of punishing children who do wrong so that they feel bad is rewarding children who do right so that they feel good, brings them very close together. But a marriage between principle and pragmatism will only be consummated if people actually prefer their children to feel good and not to feel bad. And if nobody built up their self-image and protected their self-respect when they were children, they may not.

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