

A violence-free family environment: the views of parents who don't smack

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Introduction

Debate about physical punishment of children became very public in New Zealand in 2000-2001. Attention was drawn to the issue by a number of very public child abuse cases, and media attention accompanying the second Government report to the UN Committee that monitors countries' compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Government papers released under the Official Information Act revealed official examination of legislative changes and public education in other countries (Cabinet Paper SEQ (01) 15, 23 March 2001).

For the last 50 years, most experts in child development and child management have maintained that it is not necessary to smack, hit or thrash children in order to promote good behaviour (Ludbrook & Wood 1999). Further, there is now substantial research showing that moderate and severe physical punishment is damaging and leads to an increase in violent behaviour, criminality and mental illness (Leach, 1999).

Physical punishment has been a long-standing tradition in European and other cultures and is not readily abandoned (Greven, 1991). It is still popular in New Zealand although attitudes are changing.

In 1981 Ritchie found over 80% of parents endorsed smacking in certain circumstances. Thrashing was endorsed by 15% of men and 6% of women (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1983). In 1993 Gabrielle Maxwell, at the Office of the Commissioner for Children, surveyed 1000 New Zealanders about their attitudes towards physical punishment (Maxwell, 1993). She found that 87.5% of parents believed that there were certain circumstances where it was "OK" to hit a child. The proportion believing that thrashing was justified in some circumstances was 3%.

A Heylen poll of 1000 randomly selected residents conducted for New Zealand Listener in 1995 (New Zealand Listener, January 1995) found that 49% supported corporal punishment in the home for girls and 54% for boys. A poll conducted by the New Zealand Herald in August 1999 (New Zealand Herald, 23 August 1999) found that 75.2% of 860 people interviewed believed that there were times when smacking was justified.

Overall trends suggest a significant shift in attitudes although it is true to say that the majority of parents still favour smacking as a disciplinary tool.

Despite its popularity many parents report that smacking is ineffective and that they smack more to relieve their stress or frustration than to influence a child's behaviour (Gough & Reavy, 1997). When change is discussed with parents they often ask, "What do you do instead?" Some parents have chosen not to use physical punishment. Our interest in the experience of parents who have chosen not to smack and in what influences parents to make this decision led to the research that is described below. In 2001 Russell interviewed 30 parents who chose to raise their children without smacking.

Background:

In 1995 nine parents who didn't smack, and two groups of parent-educators were interviewed about their views on, and knowledge of, alternatives to smacking (Russell, 1996). Respondent parents had a positive view of their children and used a range of approaches, particularly emphasising talking to their children. The parent-educators had a positive view of parents, but were concerned that many parents lack good information about child development, and the skills and behaviour that can be expected from children at different ages.

The present study

To extend and update her earlier work, Russell interviewed 30 parents who replied to a notice in a local free community newspaper in 2001. The aim of this research was to find out from parents who have decided against using physical punishment why and how they made this choice, to explore what motivated them to come to this decision, and how they guide their children to behave well.

Forty-five people, almost all women, responded to the notice. Owing to time constraints only 30 were interviewed by telephone, at a time suggested by each respondent, and using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews lasted between 15 and 50 minutes, and notes were written during and immediately after each interview. Verbatim comments were noted. On completion of all the interviews, the notes were analysed to identify themes.

The respondents

Two men and 28 women were interviewed. Participants represented a range of ages (between 30 and 70). Participants had from one to six children, some of these still infants and others were now grown-up. Two were grandmothers. Occupations also varied with nine being teachers of some kind (kindergarten/ primary/ ESOL/ tertiary) and others including a carpenter, beneficiaries, real estate agent, mother, archivist, and musician. The group was thus very heterogeneous.

Ethnicity

Pakeha	21
Maori	1
Pacific	0
Asian	3
Other	5

Households

Two parent	21
Single parent	8
Child and flatmate	1

Getting to a decision against smacking

Reason for not hitting	Number
The effects of use of physical punishment in my own or my partner's family of origin.	15
Decision a direct consequence of own upbringing.	11
Smacking didn't feel right, didn't make sense, unfair or wrong.	9
Smacking "didn't work" (for self as child, or with own children).	7
The alternatives are better, nicer, more effective.	5
Influenced by reading a book/ article.	3
Can't trust self when angry.	3
Have special-needs children.	3
Learnt alternatives while teacher-training.	3
Because of spiritual or religious beliefs.	2
Don't want children to be afraid of me.	2
The child didn't "need" smacking	2
Following a specific incident where something was said by other parents.	2
Following counselling/ personal development work.	2

Although the numbers are small these results are of interest. Clearly family of origin is an important influence on an individual's decisions about parenting style. Personal experience appeared to influence both the decisions to take a different course from that of one's parents or to repeat one's own experience. Asked how they had come to the decision not to smack their children, two-thirds of the parents initially volunteered information about their family of origin; and half of the participants mentioned the use of smacking in their own and/or their partner's family of origin. This ranged from abuse, to memories of one single smack as a child. Eleven participants saw their decision against using physical punishment as a direct consequence of their own upbringing; either because they had been brought up without smacking, or because they had been physically punished as children.

Many participants gave responses in several categories and a range of factors seem to play a part in influencing their decision not to smack. Issues of fairness and effectiveness were relevant to many. Some had learnt by experience and some were influenced by what they learnt from others or from what they had read.

These factors are relevant to those of us who try to influence parents to make a choice against hitting. Significantly only a small number in this particular group were influenced by what they read and none primarily by what they had seen on heard on the media. This survey was conducted at a time when there had been recent public education campaigns advocating alternatives to physical punishment and following a period when debate about the issue had been very public. Although no parent reported the campaigns or publicity as a direct influence on their decision two reported feeling affirmed in their decision by the publicity

Parent's comments included:

It'd feel foreign to me to physically hurt her. It's unfair to physically hurt a child (Mother of a 4 year old).

I was strapped 'til I bled, locked in a room 'til Dad got home and thrashed me. I made a deliberate decision before she was born. My brother didn't use physical punishment either on his kids, they're adults now and they're fine. I feel I've stopped a cycle...I feel quite good about myself, making that decision (Father of an 11 year old girl. His wife had also been beaten as a child).

Its just so unnecessary... If they had a rule that you couldn't hit a child. no child should ever die at anyone's hands. (Mother of five and grandmother of nine).

When did you decide?

Before the first child was born	16
When participant was a child.	3
When first child was born or during first year of babyhood.	9
During the years of raising children.	5

Participants came to their decision against smacking at different times. Over half had decided before their first child was born that they wouldn't use physical punishment. Of these, three had made the decision when they were themselves children. Nine decided when their first child was born or during the child's first year of babyhood. The remaining five decided during the years they were raising children; ie they smacked all their children at first, but stopped later, or they smacked the older children but not younger ones.

When is it best to deliver information about avoiding smacking? It seems sensible to give parents information before they become parents or early in parenthood. This is not only because of the dangers associated with use of physical punishment with very young children but also because of the potential advantages of never getting into the habit of smacking. It will be important to influence the attitudes of expectant parents and those with infants.

Did the parent ever smack?

Unknown	5
Had smacked their children at some time	16
Never smacked their children	9

We did not ask the respondents if they smacked their children, but most volunteered information about this and in fact 16 had smacked their children at some time; some once or twice, others routinely as a normal part of their child-rearing. Nine parents indicated they had never smacked their children. Smacking is a part of a long tradition. It is very likely that some parents who decide against smacking will occasionally smack. Parents comments about 'what makes it hard' are relevant.

Parent comment

They'd get smacked because I was stressed. (Mother of six boys).

What is at the heart of the matter?

A belief in the negative consequences of smacking	19
Concerns about violence	9
Memories of physical punishment in own childhood	7
Love of their children, belief that children need respect and care	7
Alternatives to violence work well	6
Afraid that they might lose control and do harm if they smack	5

Asking about The ‘Heart of the Matter’ is based on a technique one of the authors had experienced in a group exercise aimed at facilitating understanding of one’s own and other peoples’ views of a highly personal and controversial topic.

For the parents in this survey there was no one issue or experience behind the conviction or motivation that drives parents’ behaviour. For some it is a conviction – an intellectual or spiritual belief about the wrong of any form of violence, or about love and children’s needs. Others were influenced by their own experience - the pain associated with physical punishment in childhood or finding how well non-violent child rearing worked. Then there were those whose decision was made less from conviction or experience than from a fear of the consequences of their own behaviour if they lost control.

Advocates for change in attitudes about behaviour towards children often base the crux of their arguments on children human rights (Ludbrook & Wood, 1999) a factor not at the heart of the matter for parents in this study. Publicity about children’s rights (for example the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) is growing. The concept of children having human rights, similar to those of adults, is still foreign to many, and it is therefore not very surprising that respondents did not identify rights as a reason for not smacking.

Parents comments

My mother wanted me to smack. I said I won’t do it. She shut up after a while. Some years later she made a remark about my daughter being self-disciplined, and it’s because they haven’t been afraid of me. They’ve made decisions and been included in decisions. People say they are lovely sensible children (Mother of two, 12 and 13).

It’s an unfair way of dealing with your emotions. (Smacking) was all about my own stuff, never to do with them, it was to do with me (Mother of two, 10 and 4 years).

Who did you talk to about your decision not to smack?

	Supportive	Not supportive
Partner	15	4
Family members	9	1
Friends	4	1
Early childhood education staff	3	

We wanted to learn how much parents felt supported in their decision not to smack. Although attitudes are changing in New Zealand deciding against smacking may to

involve swimming against the tide and most of the participants found support and particularly from partners and family members. Early childhood education staff are mentioned but no other professional group. In 1999 Wood surveyed people who worked with children and families and found that participants identified a range of restraints that hindered them giving advice to parents who smacked their children (Wood, 1999). There is room for professionals who work with families to play a greater role in helping families to decide against smacking.

Eight participants commented that at least some family members had made critical comments about the way they manage their children typically saying, What that child needs is a good smack. Physical punishment is a tradition that has been around for many generations. Parents learn the tradition from their own parents (Ritchie J and J, 1983). Older people are less likely to have decided against smacking than younger people (New Zealand, Listener 1995. Extended family member support, particularly from older generations, is not necessarily going to be available to the parents who decide not to smack.

What makes it hard to avoid smacking?

The general stresses of parenting and in some cases particular stresses, like family break-up	11
Characteristics of a particular child.	7
Pressure from parents or feeling part of a minority	5
Finding useful alternatives	4
It's not hard to avoid smacking	10

Not all the participants then found it easy to avoid smacking although one third of them did. The demands and stresses of parenting are well known and do not need description. Additional personal stresses, like single-parenting or the personality of a particular child are also very real reasons why parents sometimes find it hard to restrain from use of force. Many parents give anger and stress as the reason why they hit (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1995). Information and support for parents will be important component of efforts to change smacking behaviour.

Parent comment

I only smack for defiance or if they're about to do something...I didn't smack my second one, he was easier to explain to. The forth and first were defiant. If I had a defiant son now, I might smack. Mother of six boys.

What makes it easy to avoid smacking?

Child characteristics eg "lovely temperament".	11
Own characteristics eg will power and strength of beliefs.	9
Having good information about alternatives. Publicity about the issue.	9
Using alternatives and finding they work.	8
The positive support of friends and family.	4

Again we find that parents find it easier to manage some children than others. Confidence, personal strength and good information are also relevant, as is support. The responses reaffirm the importance of public education and support.

We believe punishment of any sort per se has only small part to play in shaping a child's behaviour. While techniques and tools have a part to play it is the overall approach to the child, the way he or she is regarded and treated that are critical in helping the child behave well.

How do you guide your children to behave well?

Communicating with the child – explaining, discussing and reasoning.	22
Giving praise and acknowledgement.	10
Time out (parent or child).	10
Withdrawal of treats or privileges.	7
Setting a good example, modelling.	7
Getting children to take responsibility for their own actions.	4
Other.	6

Parents used a range of approaches and techniques: communication with the child, giving praise and acknowledgement, setting a good example and getting children to take responsibility for their own behaviour were emphasised.

In our experience, parents frequently ask what to do instead of smacking and the challenge is not simply to give them some alternative ways of guiding their children's behaviour but also helping them to understand the fundamentals of positive parenting. These are described by Penelope Leach (Leach, 1997) as:

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

Parents comments

You should show children love! Somewhere children need unconditional positive regard and home is where they can let it all hang out, talk things through, like a haven. (Mother of two adult children).

If children are happy and secure within themselves, they won't misbehave. (Mother of adult son).

Conclusion

Most research about physical punishment of children has been into attitudes about use of physical punishment and effects of physical punishment (Leach, 1999). There is also some research about why parents smack and whether they believe it is effective (Gough & Reavey, 1997). There are a number of reasons given for why parents smack

including; biblical injunctions (Greven, 1991), tradition (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1993; Gough & Reavy, 1997) because they were hit themselves (Gough & Reavy, 1997 and Ritchie & Ritchie, 1997). However the most consistent reason that parents say they hit because they are angry and stressed (Leach, 1999; Gough & Reavey, 1997; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1997).

Proponents of physical discipline will claim a small smack or a loving smack does not harm, or is in fact a necessary and effective disciplinary tool (Ahdar & Allen, 2001) but the views of parent educators do not support this (Ludbrook & Wood, 1999).

This study took a different approach. It looked at those parents who do not smack, to ask how they reached this decision, what they do instead, what helps them with their decision and what hinders them. If we want to influence parental attitudes, we need to know how they are formed. New Zealand will almost certainly move toward limiting or abolishing physical punishment in the future and such a move must be accompanied by parent education and support if it is to be effective in achieving social change and more positive disciplinary styles. This study is a beginning but there is much to learn. We need to understand better why it is that some parents remain convinced that smacking is useful and valuable and what would help parents cope with stress and anger in less violent ways. We need to know a lot more about how to reach parents with new information and particularly how to reach and influence parents from families where there have been generations of harsh physical punishment.

Note: Marie Russell and Beth Wood are Trustees of EPOCH New Zealand. Their personal belief is that changing attitudes and behaviour about the use of smacking and hitting 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.

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