

Children's voices on physical punishment

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Terry Dobbs
Specialist Interviewer, CYF
Private Practice

Beth Wood
Advocacy Manager
UNICEF New Zealand

Abstract

Physical punishment of children in the home is legal in all Australian States and in New Zealand although internationally there has been some progress in protecting children and respecting their rights in regard to physical punishment.

In New Zealand the debate about physical punishment has been very public in the last few years with the Government having reviewed but not yet made a decision about legislative change. The New Zealand Government, has however, committed to a major public education campaign aimed at discouraging physical punishment. Amongst agencies that work with children in New Zealand there is widespread support for legislative change to remove the statutory defence in cases of assault that essentially sets children apart from other people.

What do children think about physical punishment? There has only been limited consultation with children and young people on this matter. Children's views on the use of physical punishment are essential to the debate on its use.

In this paper Beth Wood reviews the status of physical punishment of children world-wide and Terry Dobbs reviews children's voices on the matter. In particular she reports on the results of a consultation with young children she recently undertook.

The authors submit that ending the use of physical punishment of children is a critical issue in the prevention of child abuse. Maintaining the right to physically punish children reflects their inferior status as people.

Introduction

We begin our presentation with the voices of children and young people from New Zealand. The video made by New Zealand children and young people for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (as part of New Zealand non-governmental organisation report to the UN Committee) was entirely scripted by the young people themselves. They say "Parents shouldn't be yelling and hitting their children. If their children are naughty they shouldn't hit them or give them a smack or anything like that". They go onto say "Children, they get abused from their parents. When they grow up they usually abuse their children and the cycle keeps on continuing". The children themselves make the connection between physical discipline and abuse and the intergenerational cycle of abuse.

There are connections between physical discipline and child abuse not the least of which is that view that children are different from adults in regard to their protection from assault. This view is reflected in the laws and common law provisions that provide statutory defences when children are hit. Parents who have been investigated for physically abusing their children frequently explain their behaviour as “discipline” (Leach, 1999) and physical punishment is a risk factor for abuse (Straus, 2000).

“Despite the growing consensus that corporal punishment breaches children's fundamental human rights, most of the world's children are still subjected to legalised assaults by their parents and by other carers and teachers”.
(www.endcorporalpunishment.org).

The present situation around the world and in New Zealand

In the following 11 countries children are protected by law from all corporal punishment:

[Austria](#) (1989)

[Finland](#) (1983)

[Latvia](#) (1998),

[Croatia](#) (1999)

[Germany](#) (2000)

[Norway](#) (1987)

[Cyprus](#) (1994)

[Israel](#) (2000)

[Iceland](#) (2003)

[Denmark](#) (1997)

[Sweden](#) (1979)

In addition, in [Belgium](#) in 2000 a new clause was added to the Constitution confirming children's right to moral, physical, psychological and sexual integrity; its legal effect is unclear and an explicit ban on all corporal punishment is under consideration. In Italy in 1996 the Supreme Court in Rome declared all corporal punishment to be unlawful; this is not yet confirmed in legislation.
(www.endcorporalpunishment.org).

In New Zealand discussion and debate on physical punishment has been very public one. Articles arguing for and against change (Wood 1998, Breen 2002, Adhar 2001) appear regularly in journals and newsletters and there have been serious media articles on the topic (Ainsley, 2001, Coddington, 2000). Awareness of the need for reform and a change in social attitude is reflected by the number of agencies, over 60 at present, joined up to a EPOCH New Zealand network of agencies committed to positive, non-violent discipline of children and repeal of section 59 (www.epochnz.org.nz).

As part of the work plan arising from the recommendations made by the United Nations Committee on the Right of the Child in 1997 (MFAT, 1997) the Government has been examining options for addressing section 59 and discouraging physical punishment/discipline.

Section 59 Crimes Act 1961 provides a statutory defense for parents who hit their children. In reality the only cases that go to court are those where children are injured. However, using the statutory defense, there have been a number of cases where parents have been acquitted of assault even when the child has had significant injuries. At least some parliamentarians are concerned about this unfair and discriminatory law. The current Prime Minister and the Minister of Social Services have both spoken to their personal support for legislative change and the cabinet is

likely to review this issue again in the future. In the meantime the Government has allocated funding of over \$10m dollars for a public education campaign on alternatives to physical punishment. While there has been a shift on public attitudes over the years most parents still think it should still be legal to hit children – some even think it should be legal to hit them with implements. (Masters, 2003).

Children's voices

There has been some research worldwide on children's experiences and views of physical discipline. Where children have been consulted overseas they have been eloquent and clear.

In 1998 a Save the Children and National Children's Bureau study in England published as *It hurts you inside: Children talking about smacking* (Willow and Hyder, 1998) involved 76 children aged between 4 and 7 years. Among the key findings was that children:

- defined smacking as hitting; most of them described a smack as a hard or very hard hit.
- said smacking hurt
- responded negatively to being smacked, and thought adults regret smacking
- mostly thought smacking is wrong.

In 2000 Save the Children Scotland commissioned a surveyed of over 300 children and young people in Scotland aged between 6 and 17 years, in focus groups or by questionnaire (Save the Children Scotland, 2000). Children in this survey used words like lonely, terrified, stunned, ashamed, hurt, unloved, humiliated and angry to describe their feelings. Children reported feeling confused because the same parents and other adults who told them hitting is wrong, used hitting themselves. Children firmly believe that physical punishment is wrong and that it sets a very bad example to young children by teaching them that using violence is an acceptable way to respond. Children were also worried that because adults are bigger and stronger they might be injured.

In 2001 children and young people from all over New Zealand were consulted in the development of the Government's *Agenda for Children* (Barwick and Gray, 2001)). Although the children and young people were not specifically questioned about physical punishment a number of children and young people reported "getting smacked, hit and bashed" as being a negative aspect of being a child or young person in New Zealand.

Young New Zealand Children's Views on Physical Discipline

The Missing Voice: What are Children's Views of Physical Discipline? (Dobbs, 2002) was a small-scale qualitative study aimed, among other things, at looking at children's views on smacking. This research was done to help understand what children's views on physical discipline are and to see whether these views are the same as adult views and to compare these children's views with that of other published research on children's views. It was completed as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Post Graduate Diploma in Child Advocacy (University of Otago).

The study involved interviewing 10 children aged between 5 and 7. The 10 children were interviewed in two groups of five children at their local school. The children were read a storybook that asked them to assist an alien creature called Splodge. Splodge was interested in smacking and thought that children would be able to answer his questions. The questions were put to the children by way of the storybook. This was done so that the children had an option to talk about their own views on smacking or talk about children's views generally. This study is an adaptation of the study carried out with 76 children by Carolyne Willow and Tina Hyder in 1998 in the United Kingdom (Willow and Hyder, 1998).

The major findings from the 10 children in the New Zealand study were:

- The children had considerable understanding and insight into their own and others behaviour and feelings and were able to express themselves clearly and articulately.
- They described a smack as a hard or very hard hit, which hurt both physically and emotionally and they associated smacking with angry parents.
- They reported feelings of sadness, anger and fear after being hit which affected their relationship with the person who hit them.
- They reported that they were most often smacked for being violent themselves by parents and people in authority or perceived authority.
- Interestingly the children believed that smacking was wrong because it hurt both physically and emotionally. However, the children expressed some levels of confusion in assimilating their own beliefs that smacking was wrong with the fact that their parents smacked.
- The children provided a wide range of alternatives to smacking as a punishment when they misbehaved. The children believed that these alternatives would be better than smacking.

Table 1: Questions for the children asked by Splodge.

• Who knows what a smack is?
• Why do you think children get smacked?
• Who usually smacks children?
• Where do children usually get smacked?
• What does it feel like to be smacked?
• How do children act after being smacked?
• How do adults act after they have given a smack?
• Adults smack children but why don't children smack adults?
• Children smack each other but why don't adults smack each other?
• When you are big, do you think you will smack children
• Is smacking something children like or don't like?
• Is it ok or not ok to smack?

- What other things could happen instead of smacking?

Some quotes from the children follow

Who knows what a smack is?

“A hard bang.”

“A hard whack” (indicated on tabletop with hand making a loud noise)

“It hurts and makes you cry.”

“Yep it really hurts.”

“It’s a hit.”

“It makes you feel sad.”

“It feels hurting.”

“It feels sad.”

“It stings when your parents smack you.”

“It makes you cry.”

“Smacking makes you feel sad and grumpy.”

Leach (1999) believes that there is an assumption from adults that ordinary smacking does not really hurt and although adults do not want to talk or think about hurting children on purpose that is the point of smacking.

Adhar and Allan (2001) argue that smacking children does them no harm. Their descriptions of smacking as a gentle tap or loving slap that doesn’t really hurt is in direct contrast to what the children in the English, Scottish and Northland studies are saying.

Why do you think children get smacked?

“It happens when you are naughty.”

“Being really naughty.”

“Hit people.”

“When you smack someone in the face.”

“For biting.”

“Pushing people on the floor.”

“Kick someone.”

“Doing something mum doesn’t want you to do.”

“Don’t listen.”

It is noticeable that the primary reason this group of children think they get smacked is because they have hurt others. The message these children may be receiving is that it is acceptable for a bigger person to hurt a smaller person. None of the children described any other forms of discipline they received for hurting others.

What does it feel like to be smacked?

“They [children] still feel scared about being hit again, ‘cause it’s sore.”

“And feels scared.”

“Um, sad and they [children] go to their room.”

“Um you try and being good.”

“It feels sad.”

“They [children] act sadly.”

The dominating feeling described by the children was one of sadness followed by fear of being hit again.

How do children act after they have been smacked?

Only one child talked about changing her behaviour after being smacked by “trying to be good”. However, the same child described getting smacked even when trying to be good.

“Sometimes you still get a smack when you being good.”

How do adults act after they have given a smack?

The children in this study related smacking to angry adults. When asked “How come the adults were angry?” children were clear that the adults were angry at the children and not necessarily angry at the behaviour that perpetuated the smacking. Children said:

“They feel really angry with you.”

“Plain angry.”

“They are angry with the children, ‘cause they don’t listen.”

Three of children in this study said that the adults (parents) felt like they wanted to smack the children more. This could be associated with the children’s fear of being smacked again.

“They feel like doing it again.”

“They still feel mad.”

“They want to do it again.”

Leach (1999) reports that physical punishment, particularly its unique juxtaposition of love and pain and submission to anger, is associated with a wide range of emotional and mental health problems later in life. Numerous other authors report that there is

overwhelming evidence that the use of physical discipline to reduce anti-social behaviour produces the opposite effect in the long term.

Where do children usually get smacked?

Children in this study said they were most often smacked on the bottom and demonstrated being hit on their bottoms as well as the face and legs.

“On their bottoms.”

“On their hands.”

“On their arms.”

“On their back if they miss.”

“On their face.”

Children in the Willow and Hyder study also reported children being smacked most often on the bottom, followed by arms, and then on, or around, their head, face, or cheek. Given the acknowledged dangers of hitting children around the head, it was concerning those children from both studies talked about being hit on their face. One child’s comment from this study “on their back if they miss”, was also of concern, this may suggest that children are often hit by parents when a parent is striking out in anger or the child moves away.

Gough and Reavey (1997) indicated that parents admitted that hitting their children met their own needs for the release of stress. Straus (1994) suggests that parents get emotional release from hitting their children, which is confused with its effectiveness in changing children’s behaviour. This raises questions for whose benefit then is it to hit children? The children’s descriptions of being hit when parents are angry is in complete contrast to Adhar and Allan (2001) who believe children are never and should never be hit in anger. There is an assumption that when parents smack their children that it is done in a controlled manner.

Why don’t adults smack each other?

Children were asked in both the English and New Zealand studies, “Children smack each other but why don’t adults smack each other?” (p. 64). This question was intended to encourage the children to think about adult behaviour and how adults manage conflict. Adults do hit each other; however these actions are not often described as smacking. This question was also intended to encourage children to make some comparisons between adults smacking children and adults smacking adults. One child spoke about the ability of adults to control themselves as a reason for not smacking each other.

“Because they know how to act when other people are around.”

One child explained that yelling was the alternative for adults’ to manage conflict:

“They only yell at each other.”

Four children explained that adults would get in to trouble for smacking each other, which prevented them from doing so.

“Someone will tell on them.”

“Because they will get into trouble.”

“Yeah they will get into trouble.”

“They’ll get kicked out if they do.”

From this study it is difficult to ascertain whether the children made any correlation between the ways adults resolve conflict and the ways adults and children resolve conflict. None of the children mentioned adults getting into trouble for smacking children. These children may be beginning to see that there is one set of rules for adults and another for children in our society and children are not afforded the same rights as adults.

When you are big do you think you will smack children?

Two children felt that the size of the adult compared to the size of the child was the deciding factor for them not wanting to smack children when they were big:

“No ‘cause we’ll be big and they’ll be little.”

“ ‘Cause it’s not nice to hurt little children.”

The younger children (5-year-olds) were more likely to relate to the size difference of adults and children. One child expressed a belief that it would be hard to smack your own child:

“ No because they [adults] just don’t want to smack them because they’re their child’s.”

Five children found it difficult to articulate exact reasons why they would not smack their children and just said “No”. However their “No” answers were not passive but spoken quite loudly. The eldest child (7-years-old) in the group was unsure whether he would smack children or not when he was an adult. This could indicate that older children have started to rationalise and take on commonly held views that smacking is an inevitable part of parenting. Added to this could be the omission of any other modelled forms of discipline to resolve conflict. None of the children gave instances of when smacking would be acceptable to them when they were “big”.

Is it OK or not OK to smack?

A lot of thought was put into the next question asking children “Is it OK to smack or not OK to smack?” as it may have been seen as leading. Children were asked for their opinion rather than asking them to share their views, however the discussion from this question generated some interesting conversation. Some of this conversation was generated after finishing reading the Splodge book and the children were having turns

listening to their voices on the tape at the time. All of the children were adamant that it was not okay to smack.

“It’s not OK.”

“It’s not OK but mothers and fathers do it.”

“They might be allowed too, but I don’t know.”

Teachers aren’t allowed to, some do.”

“Yeah, sometimes Nana does too.”

“People shouldn’t do that smacking.”

This dialogue may have been generated, in part, due to the wording of this question. Most children have good comprehension of the meaning of; what is OK and what is not OK (right equals OK and wrong equals not OK). While the children felt it was not OK to smack they began to discuss whether or not adults could be wrong. However, perhaps if adults were doing wrong things then the children began to justify these adult actions by questioning whether adults should be ‘allowed’ to smack. These children could be trying to rationalise that physical discipline is a necessary part of parenting.

Discussion

Few topics rival physical discipline in generating passionate debate, whether in academic study, political debates, television documentaries, informal discussions within families or discussions with work colleagues. However, the children that were involved in this study and the studies referenced in this project saw little debate that the use of physical discipline is not only wrong but is ineffective, physically and emotionally harmful and gives children confusing messages about the use of violence. Furthermore there was little debate from the children that hitting limited alternatives to resolve conflict and was harmful to their relationships with their parents. The children’s discussions indicated how hitting may assist in their acceptance of their place in society and the part physical discipline may inevitably continue to play in their lives.

Adult opinions on physical discipline have dominated the debate on its use. However there are many reasons why this point of view can be clouded and self-justifying. In this study, reports by children of their experiences of physical discipline are at odds with adult assumptions about the effects of its use. It is therefore imperative that more research is conducted into children’s perspectives so that we can further understand the impact and effects of this adult behaviour on children. We need to develop a culture of listening to and valuing children in order to afford them their rightful status as taonga (treasures).

Conclusion

One of the authors of this paper (Beth Wood) once asked children for their advice on how adults should behave if they want children to behave well (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 1994). Among other things they said:

Be fair, don't hit us, listen to us, don't yell at us, talk things over with us, keep your promises, understand us, show us you like us, give us help when we need it, don't expect us to do things we can't do, be sure we understand and when we are angry let us cool down.

The responses given in the examples above reflect children's awareness that it is not so much techniques and punishment that matters in guiding children to behave well as it is attitude, behaviour and understanding of children's needs.

The limited consultation that has taken place with children indicates that children experience smacking and hitting as painful, frightening, unfair, ineffective, damaging of relationships, serving adult needs and sadly, sometimes something they sometimes deserve because they are "bad". Why do grown-ups find it so hard to give up endorsing the ideas that in some circumstances violence is OK and that children do not have the same status as adults in regard to their rights to physical integrity and safety?

"In previous centuries, special defences existed in legislation in many states to justify corporal punishment of wives, servants, slaves and apprentices. Violence to women remains far too prevalent, but in most states it is no longer defended in legislation. It is paradoxical and an affront to humanity that the smallest and most vulnerable of people should have less protection from assault than adults".
(www.endcorporalpunishment.org).

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