

Terry Dobbs Opinion Piece (Unpublished) May 2007

Children and physical punishment

Children's views and experience of physical punishment is a topic rarely addressed in the current debate surrounding the Crime (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Bill, it is a very relevant one at a time when a visiting "expert" is telling us that parents should use a minor forms of physical discipline because it is effective. Not all "experts" agree and an insight into how hard and often many parents hit is a timely reminder that we are better off discouraging all physical punishment.

As part of my Masters Thesis in 2004, I interviewed 80 New Zealand children, between five and 14 years of age (with their parents consent) to elicit children's views on family discipline. Children in my study (a randomly selected group – none of whom had ever been brought to the attention of the authorities) reported alarming rates of frequent and harsh physical punishment. These children were from ordinary families in ordinary towns.

Children in my study were asked "What are some of the things that happen to children when they do things they shouldn't". The majority of children said that parental discipline consisted of some kind of physical punishment, for example, "you get a smack in the mouth" (seven year old boy) and "You get a clip on the ear" (10 year old girl).

Children were also asked "do sometimes children get smacked when they do things they shouldn't? Ninety two percent of all children in this study reported that children were physically punished. The 12 to 14 year olds all reported that they had been physically punished, while 90% of the five to seven year-olds and 86% of the nine to 11 year-olds reported that parents physically punished children. They reported that physical punishment was the disciplinary technique most often used in most families, and was often used first rather than as a last resort. Only ten percent (that is, two or number=two) of the five to seven year-olds and 14% (as earlier bracket n=4) of the nine to 11 year-olds said they were not smacked.

Children were also asked "where do children get smacked". Some of their responses: "Dads belt, that's what we get" (13 year old boy), "You get a slap across the face or a clip round the ears" (14 year old girl), "My dad uses a tennis racket" (seven year old boy). The dangers of hitting children on or about the head are known. It is concerning that relatively large numbers of all age groups and both genders in this study reported that children are smacked or hit on or around the face, head and back. Children also reported being hit with implements.

Children in the study associated physical punishment with angry parents, often describing being smacked when parents were angry and lashing out at them. In the children's view both parents and the child were angry when physical punishment occurred. Many described the smacking becoming harder and harder overtime. "Sometimes with my parents it just depends on if we've done it before or if it's the first time. If it's the first time, they [parents] are not so hard on us but if we've done it many times

before then they [parents] start to get more angrier and angrier and harder punishment” (10 year old boy).

Children reported that when they had been hit they experienced a desire to take “revenge” and “take it out” on parents and siblings.

Some adults claim that when parents smack their children that it is done in a controlled manner. Children in this study tell us this is not the case. The results of my study indicate that the loving tap, administered calmly by a controlled parent as the last resort is a myth. Parents hit because hitting is customary in our country. It is time that our custom changed.

Terry Dobbs has been a social worker, forensic interviewer and child advocate. She is currently doing research into family violence at the Auckland University of Technology.