

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH HITTING CHILDREN?

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A Review of Research

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Physical punishment is a moral wrong. This morning I am going to take that for granted and look to research in psychology and related disciplines to see if it is wrong in other ways. Why bother? you might ask. Since hitting children is morally wrong what does it matter whether it's an effective way to produce well-disciplined children who grow into socialised, responsible adults? Ends, after all, cannot justify means. Well, morally they cannot, but politically and socially they are often made to do so. Indiscipline amongst children - at home and at school - and violently antisocial behaviour amongst young people and adults, is a major concern almost everywhere. As long as people believe that the physical punishment of children is, or even may be, an effective disciplinary technique, morality alone will not stop it. We need educational programmes, squarely based on research, to counterbalance that belief. Let me tell you now that the research literature - extensively reviewed by Peter Newell and by Phillip Greven in books on display here and culled in the bibliography to this paper, contains not one single piece of data suggesting that physical punishment is effective. Indeed the literature tells us that hitting, imprisoning and humiliating children is not only wrong, it is useless and dangerous with children today and tends to produce violent adults tomorrow.

## WHY, THEN, DO PEOPLE THINK SMACKING CHILDREN WORKS?

Firstly, I think, because commonsense suggests that if you punish somebody every time she does something wrong, surely she'll learn not to do it. Parents who start smacking children in babyhood are often trying to teach safety-lessons: smacking when a baby crawls towards the fire or a toddler goes into the road. The urgency of the "lessons" and the obvious rightness of trying to protect children from danger overcomes any moral or sentimental scruples they might otherwise have about hitting such very small people. By the time those safety-issues have given way to tiresomeness - interrupting, making a mess, being "cheeky", smacking is a habitual response.

Many of the professionals who might advise new parents not to smack infants and toddlers believe that, whatever their personal feelings, this kind of "aversive teaching" has a good pedigree going back to the great figures in Behaviourism and Learning theory - to Pavlov and Skinner. Like Freud, their work has been distorted by history, though. Pavlov was concerned only with animals and only with reflex responses. He refused to concern himself with "punishment" or any of the feelings - such as guilt or remorse - that social learning depend on. Skinner did not favour the use of "aversive stimuli" (ie painful punishments). He considered positive reinforcement techniques - rewards - to be both more effective in modifying behaviour and morally preferable. [4,5].

The pedigree doesn't exist, then, but what about the commonsense?

Can't we SEE that the smacked child desists from doing wrong? Well yes, of course she does for that moment, while she cries. But that's only useful learning - a real contribution to discipline - if her future behaviour is altered. Research tells us it is not; indeed it tells us that no kind of punishment is an effective way of changing behaviour at any age because to change behaviour we have to do several things that punishment cannot do: we have to motivate people to do something different from what impulse or inclination suggests; we have to ensure that they understand what that different and desirable behaviour is, and that it is available to them; and we have to make them feel good about choosing to behave that way. The smacked child is not motivated to please the parent: far from it: she is hurt, angry and humiliated. The punishment tells her that she has done wrong but it does not tell her what she should have done instead and should do in the future, nor will she even hear, through her angry tears, if the parent tries to tell her. Most smacked or beaten children remember the punishment - often for years - but never understand - and therefore cannot remember or avoid - the behaviour that led to it.

You should be aware, though, of a powerful body of work, deriving from animal experiments and human torture, showing that if you punish people viciously enough avoiding punishment becomes sufficient motivation to change behaviour, and absence of pain becomes a sufficient reward to keep people in line. Confessions and betrayals can be extracted this way; animals can be controlled and institutionalised groups of people - often those suffering from autism, mental retardation or a range of psychoses - can be trained. Some psychologists, seeing themselves as scientists and therefore "ethically neutral" maintain that physical punishment that started at a sufficiently intense level, would work in families and they regret the "moral scruples" that prevent them proving it.

I mention this body of work because it answers the people who would like to believe that "Moderate" physical punishment - "a little smack" or "a good spanking" - is not actually painful and angrily reject your references to pain or the fear of pain as "special pleading". Physical punishment is meant to hurt: it is pain that makes it punishment and if it really doesn't hurt, it isn't punishment. It is also a warning to the many people, perhaps a majority in most countries, who accept the need to control parents' use of physical punishment - with legal definitions of what is "moderate and reasonable" and legal sanctions for those whose punishments amount to cruelty - but will not accept the need to ban it altogether. Van Houten and his colleagues are clear that minimal physical punishments will never be effective. So those who support the physical punishment of children at all should logically support what every country represented here would label cruelty to children. They don't, of course. Instead they accept ineffective levels of physical punishment which then escalate but still don't work....

## INDIVIDUAL PARENTS DON'T RECOGNIZE THE RISK OF ESCALATION

The tap the hand of the baby who fiddles with the TV and when he fiddles again they tap him again and when he fiddles again they smack a bit harder. But ask them if they would ever spank him and they'll tell you "no". Whatever their personal punishment practices at the time of an enquiry, parents regard those as "normal" and anything more violent as "abnormal" or "cruel". But return in a year's time and many of them are found to have incorporated those previously rejected levels of punishment into their "normal practice". Longitudinal data from the Child Development Unit at the University of Nottingham [14], (available to you in the exhibition room) demonstrates this process in the lives of more than 700 families. Two thirds of the parents had slapped babies before they were one year old. By the time the children were four the frequency and severity of physical punishment (as well as the numbers of parents using it) had escalated; more than nine out of ten of the children were now smacked or spanked at least weekly. By the time the children were seven, some parents had abandoned corporal punishment but many of those who still used it had moved on from bare hands. Almost a quarter regularly punished their seven year olds with straps, belts, sticks and other implements, while a further 53% regularly threatened to do so.

## ESCALATION IS NOT UNIVERSAL, OF COURSE.

Some people argue that even if "moderate" physical punishment does no good to a child's social learning, the right to use it may be good for parents and therefore should be retained provided it does children no harm. So let's look at data concerning the kinds of harm it does:

### Physical Harm is differently defined by different groups

Psychologists of the school I have been quoting would not classify as "harm" any temporary physical effect of a beating - such as wheals, or even cuts, on a child's skin. Pediatricians take a very different view. Aware of the serious injuries that sometimes result from punishments that were intended to be "mild" - misplaced blows that land on the head, or cause a child to fall, for example - some consider that the disproportionate size and strength of an adult and a small child makes any physical punishment physically dangerous: "The fine line between discipline and child abuse differs from one family to another and is often shockingly at variance with accurate information about the vulnerabilities of the immature bodies of small children..." [16]. Most consider that any visible sign left by a punishment must be classed as "physical damage" and that since all physical damage interferes with bodily integrity, it must be regarded as harmful. A group of eminent American Pediatricians studied in 1985, for example, [17] classified spankings that left red marks on the skin as harmful and "inappropriate". 49% of the group stated that they would report to the child protection authorities any parent whose child had visible bruising, however transitory, from physical punishment.

Emotional harm is difficult to establish because -establishing cause-and-effect links between any specific child-rearing practice and any single factor in the adult personality is what you might call a mug's game. However, academic psychology, psychiatry and

psycho-analysis have produced an extensive literature associating parental physical punishment with a wide range of personality disorders and neuroses in adult life and there are some prospective field studies providing direct evidence of causal links between clusters of child-rearing techniques (including physical punishment) and the development of rigid or authoritarian personality types. It may amuse you to know that my own Ph.D thesis - more years ago than I like to say - was on this topic. In all such work the factor that emerges as pathological is juxtaposition in physical punishment of love and pain, anger and submission.

There is no doubt, though that physical punishment increases aggression.

An extensive body of research, sited across psychology, sociology and criminology, clearly establishes this. National commissions or committees in the United States, in West Germany prior to unification and in Australia, charged with looking into the levels of all violence in their societies and recommending measures to combat it, have each concluded that the ending of the physical punishment of children should be a governmental priority. The Australian National Committee on Violence, reporting in 1989, put it like this: "The greatest chance we have to prevent violence in society is to raise children who reject violence as a method of problem-solving, who experience and believe in the right of the individual to grow in a safe environment".

As early as 1980 the evidence concerning physical punishment in schools and other institutions was carefully reviewed by a working party of the British Psychological Society (of which I was a member) It reported to the Government: "There is now a weight of evidence to show that there is a link between exposure to even minor violence in the real world and acquisition of violent modes of behaviour.. Children have a strong tendency, without which much of their education could scarcely proceed, to copy the behaviour of their elders... A beating contains the elements that provide a strong example to the young. A figure in a position of authority solves a problem by resorting to physical aggression..." [24].

Banning beating in schools and other institutions is crucial but it is not enough. The widely held belief that physical punishment by a parent is less damaging because of his intimate relationship with the child, is erroneous. Children have a far greater tendency to model themselves on the behaviour of their parents or parent-substitutes than on any outside authority figure so the potential for harm in the home is greater. A simple statement by G.C. Walters and J.E. Grusec sums up the findings of many studies: " If parents employ physical punishment on their children they will become physically aggressive, whereas if they rely on other forms of punishment then children are less likely to become aggressive.." [25]

Some parents, teachers, Police and Judges who are willing to agree that physical punishment is not an effective way to teach socialised behaviour or to prevent interpersonal violence, nevertheless wish to retain it to punish violent behaviour such as aggression to parents or siblings, bullying at school, or violently anti-social behaviour in adolescence. Ironically, these

are exactly the circumstances in which physical punishments are most likely to provoke more aggression. Every mother who "bites back" her biting three year old should read the study of 379 five year olds and their mothers which explains : "Physical punishment is itself a form of attack - perhaps often perceived as aggression by the child. If parents serve as models, then it is not surprising that the children adopt similar ways of behaving... when the parents.... employ physical punishment they are providing a living example of the use of aggression at the very moment they are trying to teach the child not to be aggressive." [27].

And such children certainly do become aggressive. There is recent work showing that they are physically violent to their siblings, and there are so many relating physical punishment at home to being a bully at school that as long ago as 1977 The UK Association of Educational Psychologists told the British Department of Education and Science : "Children who are beaten tend in their turn to beat and to bully." [28].

The aggression does not remain within the childhood worlds of home and school, either. John and Elizabeth Newson's most recent follow up study [29] for example, unequivocally demonstrates a strong association between physical punishment in childhood and adult, often criminal, violence: having controlled for social factors such as poverty, unemployment and so forth they report that "The measures which stand out as most predictive of criminal record before the age of 20 are having been smacked or beaten once a week or more at 11, and having had a mother with a high commitment to corporal punishment at that age".

1990  
Amel

## PARENTS ARE RIGHT TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT DISCIPLINE

It's important that those of us who campaign for an end to physical punishment should never allow ourselves to be seen as wanting an end, or even a loosening, of discipline within families. But in research terms many parents are quite simply wrong about the kind of discipline that is likely to the kind of socially acceptable behaviour they want of their children. Telling people they are wrong is seldom useful but a body of carefully validated research work, starting in the 1950's, and carried out with successive groups of children and parents in their own homes [33] often helps parents re-think their own techniques. Researchers studied mothers' handling of "aggressive behaviours" in children, defining that term to include not only direct physical or verbal aggression but also all deliberately "tiresome", "defiant" or "disobedient" behaviour. They predicted that children whose mothers were "permissive" of such behaviour - doing little to prevent or stop it - would frequently behave in these ways, while children whose mothers reacted punitively would do so much less often. Consistent findings, over several samples, showed that the first prediction was always correct but the second was always wrong. Allowing this type of behaviour certainly increased it, but so did punishing it, especially if the punishments were physical ones. The "best-behaved" children had mothers who were neither permissive nor punitive. But, contrary to the expectations of the researchers ( which would probably be shared by most lay-people) the "worst-behaved" groups of children were not those whose mothers were both permissive

and non-punitive, but those whose mothers were permissive *and* punitive: "the most peaceful home is one in which the mother believes aggression is not desirable and under no circumstances is ever permissible when addressed to her, but who never uses physical punishment on the child but relies on non-punitive forms of control....."

AS THE EVIDENCE AGAINST PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT PILES UP, continuation of the practise seems increasingly incredible. Why do so many parents still smack their children. Why? Partly because they are venting on their children stresses emanating from adult societies that are far from family-friendly and partly because they cannot think how else to discipline their children. We shall be hearing more about those topics later on. But partly physical punishment continues because psychological mechanisms perpetuate it from generation to generation. The parent who is most likely to smack her children is one who was smacked when she was a child. It is her belief that "it didn't do me any harm" that insulates her from moral argument and, unless we understand the mechanisms that are in operation, it will successfully insulate her from education as well.

Children identify with their parents or parent-figures. That is the generally accepted basis of family bonds and therefore of all social learning. In order to identify with parents, children have to believe that those parents are good people and that what they do is right. No pre-pubescent child can comfortably accept that his adult model is "bad" or "wrong": The child whose father is in prison will often find it easier to believe in a court conspiracy than in his father's guilt; the child who has been sexually abused all too readily believes that it was, in some mysterious way, her fault. In the same way, children who are physically punished, even those who are physically abused, seldom blame the people who hurt them. They blame themselves for misbehaviour or inherent wickedness that "deserved" the treatment meted out to them.

A study of a very large sample of University students, reported in the international journal Child Abuse and Neglect [30] shows that this tendency to self-blame for physical punishment continues into adult life and therefore into parenthood. Subjects retrospectively justified not only punitive but brutal parents by assigning crimes to the children they used to be. Far from blaming those parents, they often expressed gratitude to them for the way they themselves had grown up. And during interviews, they consistently played down the violence used towards them. For example, 80% reported being spanked as children, but only 40% reported that they had received "physical punishment"; for many young adults, then, smacked bottoms were too trivial to count. Some subjects had suffered lasting bruises from parental beatings, but only 10% of them considered those punishments to have been excessive or cruel. Even amongst the group of students who had received hospital treatment for fractures, or other serious injuries resulting from parental punishment, only 43% classified themselves as having been "abused" or "cruelly treated". The study concludes that "the recipients of punitive physical discipline are the least likely to recognise its inappropriateness".

Clearly, then, children who receive physical punishment at the hands of their parents are likely to grow into adults who have incorporated the justice and rightness of such punishment

into their self-images and belief-systems. Lay-people often assume that if children have been victimised by physical punishment (or brutalised by physical or sexual abuse), they will consciously avoid repeating the pattern with their own children because they "know what it is like". But this is a dangerous over-simplification. Therapy that helps victimised children to see themselves as victims - as the innocent recipients of mis-used adult power - offers some hope of breaking the inter-generational pattern. But without that, even young people who can allow themselves some anger at punishing (or abusing) parents, and consciously intend to avoid treating their own children as they were treated, often meet the stresses of parenthood by falling back on the old, familiar pattern. 11

yes!

② Educational programmes are necessary but data such as these suggest that they can never be sufficient. As long as parental physical punishment is generally accepted and widely practised in the present, it seems inevitable that it will continue to be so in the future, unless the on-going process is interrupted from outside. That is perhaps the very worst thing that is wrong with hitting children and the reason why any country that wishes to control or limit it must ban it by law.



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