

Not Without Reason

**The place of physical correction
in the discipline of children**



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Summary

- Advocates of legislation against all physical punishment of children tend to be selective in their use of evidence, citing research on violence and abuse, and then proceeding to make a blanket application of the findings of such studies to all corporal discipline.
- There is a vital distinction to be drawn between abusive and violent corporal punishment on the one hand, and physical correction administered to a moderate extent out of a genuine concern for the moral development and safety of the child.
- A survey of articles on corporal punishment published in clinical and psychosocial journals has shown that they frequently take the form of opinion-driven commentaries. Most of the best studies, methodologically speaking, demonstrate the beneficial effects of appropriate physical correction.
- The rate of reported physical abuse of children in Sweden has increased dramatically since corporal discipline was outlawed in 1979.
- In Sweden, the prohibition of all forms of physical punishment has resulted in the prosecution of caring parents and the intervention of the social authorities in well-functioning families with devastating effects.
- Recent reviews of academic studies on corporal punishment have concluded that there is no sound basis for the blanket imposition of legislation against all forms of physical correction.

- Studies which have measured for a balanced combination of corporal discipline and verbal reasoning, have found that it is effective in preventing a recurrence of misbehaviour and also leads to a reduction in the necessity of a physical sanction as children grow older.
- Research which takes a broad view of the dynamics of the family demonstrates the positive effects of corporal discipline used consistently and appropriately in the context of a warm, caring and loving parent-child relationship.
- Physical correction is most effective and beneficial for the child when it is used in response to disobedience or wilful defiance, in a controlled manner, accompanied by a verbal explanation and with the good of the child at heart.
- Research demonstrates that parents who use appropriate and moderate corporal punishment in the overall discipline of their children, use ridicule, fear and withdrawal of love less than other parents.
- Parents who are least likely to use corporal discipline are the most likely to report “explosive attacks of rage” when they are unable to control their children’s behaviour.
- Legislation against all physical punishment of children is unfounded and would be contrary to the interests both of children and their families. Parents should rather be encouraged to use corporal discipline in a responsible and effective way.

Introduction

While all responsible practitioners are concerned to see children protected from violence and abuse, professional opinion on the loving and controlled use of a non-violent and non-abusive physical sanction is very much divided. Two thirds of American paediatricians in recent polls indicated that they supported the use of moderate corporal discipline and opposed a blanket ban.¹ In the UK, following the High Court ruling that childminders may smack children in their care with parental consent, a survey of General Practitioners in June 1994, found that 73% believed “the High Court was right to rule in favour of smacking a child.”²

In a study on the effects of corporal punishment, Samuel Alibrando of Biola University suggested that many modern studies have taken a simplistic view of corporal punishment and failed to consider the complexities of the subject. In so doing, he endorsed the view of Maurer (1974), that corporal punishment had not been a subject of “sufficient concern to experimental psychologists except peripherally as one minor variable in studies of delinquency.”³ Little has changed over the intervening years. In a more recent extensive review of the literature on the subject, Robert Larzelere observed that much of the research which is frequently cited to justify a blanket ban on all corporal discipline has continued to be cross-sectional or has focused on the use of unreasonably harsh or abusive measures of physical punishment.⁴

The case in favour of a universal ban on all forms of physical correction is by no means as conclusive as may appear from the headlines which frequently appear in the news media. It is not without significance that the organisers of a conference on *The Short-term and Long-term Consequences of Corporal Punishment*, sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics, subsequently confessed that they had approached the subject with

“a preconceived notion that corporal punishment, including spanking, was innately and always bad.” However, having heard a presentation of the evidence, Professors S Kenneth Schonberg and Stanford B Friedman both acknowledged that, “given a relatively healthy family life in a supportive environment, spanking in and of itself is not detrimental to a child or predictive of later problems.”⁵

In this study, we shall begin by defining the distinction between abusive physical punishment on the one hand, and non-abusive physical punishment on the other. We shall then examine the research findings which are frequently cited in support of a legal ban on all forms of corporal discipline, followed by a brief review of the broader body of research. In conclusion, we shall outline an approach to public policy which will safeguard the interests both of children and their families.

Note:

When discussing nonabusive physical correction, throughout this study we shall refer to ‘smacking’ since this is the term by which it is most commonly known in the United Kingdom. However, many of the authorities cited from the United States refer to ‘spanking’. The two words are interchangeable. In both instances what is being referred to is a moderate and controlled physical sanction applied in a careful and responsible manner to a child’s hand, leg or bottom, either with an open hand or a safe object.

1. A vital distinction

Violence may be defined as the “exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse”. When used by adults in dealing with children, it is generally impulsive, aggressive and motivated by negative feelings. It is an expression of an adult’s own anger or frustration and is used as a release mechanism for his or her own emotions rather than for the benefit of the child.

Few would argue with the NSPCC when they define cruelty to children as:

neglect, physical injury, sexual or emotional abuse inflicted or knowingly not prevented, which causes significant harm or death.⁶

However, in another current publication, the NSPCC take their definition of physical cruelty a stage further, when they bracket together “hurting or injuring a child, inflicting pain, poisoning, drowning or smothering.”⁷ Again, no one would disagree that injuring, poisoning, drowning or smothering a child is abusive. But ‘hurting’ a child or ‘inflicting pain’ is, in certain contexts, a different matter altogether. While there is no doubt that the *gratuitous* infliction of pain on a child constitutes abuse, there are times in the experience of every loving parent when it becomes necessary to cause pain to his or her child.

For example, parents will inevitably hurt their children when they attempt to remove a splinter from a finger, or clean a wound on an arm or leg. And all children experience pain when they are disciplined, whether it be the pain of a physical sanction, or the emotional pain or disappointment caused by being sent to their room or having a privilege withdrawn.

It therefore follows that not all physical correction is necessarily abusive and violent any more than all hugs and cuddles are sexually abusive and exploitative. In order to distinguish between abusive and nonabusive treatment, it is necessary to consider the physical contact

in terms of its nature, motivation, purpose and effect, as well as its extent. For example, a punch or a kick will always constitute a violent response, but a smack on a child's hand, leg or buttocks may be either abusive or nonabusive depending on other factors. If the smack is administered in an aggressive manner to release the frustrations of the parent without regard to the best interests of the child, it increases the risk of abuse, but if it is administered with moderation and self-control out of a genuine love and concern for the moral development and safety of the child, it may be regarded as a positive sanction. Parents who smack in this manner are clearly not thereby injuring or abusing their children.⁸

As Robert Larzelere observes:

Spanking can be inappropriately used as a short-term solution to problems arising from the child's needs for more attention, nurturance, understanding and praise. However, this does not necessarily mean that spanking is always detrimental when used moderately by parents who are competent in these other aspects of parenting. Indeed, if a punitive technique such as spanking is used effectively, it should subsequently be needed less often. Thus, parents who use spanking ineffectively become frequent spankers; those who use it more effectively have less need to use it later on. This alone could account for the usual associations between current spanking and current child aggression.

Abusive parents tend to be characterised by a pattern of negative components. Abusive parents use more physical punishment, negative labelling and verbal aggression, use less reasoning, are less discriminating in their use of positive feedback, and are more likely to respond to misbehaviour with anger (Oates et al 1980; Reid et al 1982; Trickett & Kuczynski 1983). This raises some doubt about whether the use of physical punishment is the major antecedent of family violence or whether it is one of a set of symptoms of a parenting pattern that encourages family violence.⁹

The research which purports to demonstrate that all physical punishment is an evil to be discouraged by education and prohibited by legislation invariably omits to pay due regard

to the overall parent-child relationship and fails to draw any distinction between discipline which is abusive on the one hand and nonabusive on the other.

2. The case for abolition weighed and found wanting

EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children), the foremost campaigning group against corporal discipline, advance four chief objections to its use:

- (a) it violates children's fundamental rights as people;
- (b) it is dangerous, linked to child abuse and can cause serious 'accidental' injuries;
- (c) it teaches children nothing positive;
- (d) it encourages the development of violent attitudes and actions, in childhood and later life.¹⁰

While such claims may be true of arbitrary, severe and violent actions towards children, the available research evidence does not support EPOCH's position with regard to controlled, moderate and loving corporal discipline.

Campaigners who are opposed to any form of physical chastisement in principle, tend to be selective in their use of evidence, citing research on violence and abuse and then proceeding to make a blanket application of the findings of such studies to all corporal discipline. However, in a letter to the Editor of *Pediatrics*, three senior paediatricians reasoned that the evidence for the supposed detrimental effects of corporal punishment which had been referred to by Wissow and Roter in an earlier issue of the journal, was based only on physical punishment of children over 10 years old, or on abusive levels of corporal punishment. They noted that:

[Wissow and Roter] provide no evidence of any detrimental effect of spanking of pre-schoolers using appropriate procedure and dosages. The only cited study that actually investigated mild spanking found that it was *not* predictive of any negative outcomes in the study (Seagull & Weinshank). One reference (Forehand & McMahon) cited as 'evidence that parents can learn nonviolent means of child

discipline' actually supports the use of a spanking procedure to enforce compliance with time out.¹¹

The paediatricians went on to demonstrate that claims that corporal punishment increases violent behaviour and is "less effective in the long-term", are contradicted by the best longitudinal studies. In four prospective longitudinal studies involving young children, the average correlation between parental physical correction and subsequent child aggression was insignificant (Chamberlain 1978; Johannesson 1974; Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, Huesmann 1978; Sears 1961). The commonly supposed evidence for long-term detrimental effects of corporal discipline is primarily derived from retrospective data emphasising abusive hitting or being physically punished, not as a pre-schooler, but as a teenager.¹²

Robert Larzelere agrees. He observes that few studies have distinguished between the effects of minimal, moderate, and severe physical punishment, and contends that:

before we can confidently predict that the elimination of physical punishment would be an effective way to reduce family violence, we need further evidence that the effects of moderate physical punishment fit Straus' violence-training theory as well.¹³

In a review of the literature which regards all forms of physical discipline as abusive, Drs Trumbull and Ravenel note that what may be described as ordinary parental smacking is frequently lumped together with kicking, punching and beating. Also these studies often include, and even emphasise, the corporal punishment of adolescents rather than focusing on pre-school children, where corporal discipline is particularly effective. Trumbull and Ravenel consider that:

This blurring of distinctions between spanking and physical abuse, and between children of different ages, gives critics the illusion of having data condemning all disciplinary spanking.

They also observe that most of the arguments used against physical correction can also be used against other forms of discipline. Any form of discipline, when used inappropriately

and without restraint, can result in distorting a child's perception of justice and harming his emotional development.¹⁴

In 1993, researchers from the National Institute of Healthcare Research in the USA, conducted a systematic review of the research literature on corporal punishment and found that 83% of the 132 identified articles published in clinical and psychosocial journals were merely opinion-driven editorials, reviews or commentaries, devoid of new empirical findings. Most of the empirical studies were methodologically flawed by grouping the impact of abuse with moderate physical correction. The best studies, methodologically speaking, demonstrated beneficial, rather than detrimental, effects of such discipline in certain situations.¹⁵

The belief that "smacking teaches hitting" is simply not supported by objective evidence. A child's ability to differentiate between abusive hitting and nonabusive smacking depends largely upon the parents' attitude towards, and use of, corporal discipline. There is certainly no evidence in the medical literature to suggest that a mild smack on the buttocks of a disobedient child by a loving parent teaches the child aggressive behaviour.¹⁶

In the words of Professor H R Schaffer of Strathclyde University and Editor of the journal *Social Development*:

There is...no justification for making the sort of sweeping generalisations about the effectiveness of [physical] punishment or about its consequences for the psychological development of children that are to be found in the literature of EPOCH or other contentious writing.¹⁷

3. Lessons from Sweden

If the evidence of the research against smacking is found wanting when weighed in the balance, what about the experience of those countries which have passed legislation prohibiting the use of all physical punishment of children? Anti-smacking campaigners refer with pride to the record of Sweden, the first country in the world to have banned all physical punishment under the 1979 Parent and Guardianship Code. EPOCH's co-ordinator, Peter Newell, refers to the chairwoman of the Swedish voluntary organisation, BRIS (Barnens Rätt i Samhället - Children's Rights in Society), who expressed the view that the legal prohibition of physical punishment would lead to fewer cases of child abuse.¹⁸

However, in a study published in 1986, Gelles and Edfeldt noted that it was not possible to compare the respective levels of harms experienced by children in Sweden and the United States of America, because in Sweden there was no official reporting of *actual* child maltreatment. However, in the area of *reported* use of severe and abusive violence (e.g. kicking, biting, hitting with a fist, beating up, threatening to use a gun or a knife), the study found no significant difference between Swedish and American parents.¹⁹

Dr Larzelere noted that the Gelles and Edfeldt (1986) results compared a 1975 American survey with a 1980 Swedish survey. An equivalent American survey was repeated in 1985. When he compared the average of the 1975 and 1985 American survey with the 1980 Swedish survey Larzelere found that while the rate of corporal discipline was lower in Sweden than in the United States, the rate of physical child abuse was significantly higher in Sweden. The figures indicate that the rate of beating a child up was three times as high, the rate of using a weapon (knife or gun) was twice as high, the overall rate of "very severe violence" (kicking, biting, punching, beating up and using or threatening to use a weapon) was 49% higher, and the rate of pushing, grabbing or shoving was 39% higher in Sweden than in the United States.²⁰

In contrast to oft-repeated claims that the child abuse rate has decreased in Sweden due to the legislation passed in 1979, according to a study by Adrienne Haeuser of the University

of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Swedish professionals generally feel that the anti-smacking law has not changed the child abuse problem one way or the other. This finding is particularly significant in view of the fact that Haeuser is herself actively involved in campaigning against corporal discipline under the auspices of EPOCH-USA.²¹

The statistics frequently quoted by opponents of corporal discipline are misleading in that they tend not to compare like with like when seeking to present the post-1979 Swedish experience in a positive light. For example, it is claimed that the physical child abuse rate known to the Swedish police of 6.5 per 1,000, compares favourably with statistics in the United States with its child abuse rate of 9.2 to 10.7 per 1,000.

However, the 1988 report of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) in which the American statistics are published, includes sexual and emotional abuse *in addition to* physical abuse. The figure for the *physical* child abuse rate alone is 4.9 to 5.7 per 1,000, depending on the definition of physical abuse employed. Furthermore, this figure includes cases known to a wide range of welfare, social services and education agencies as well as the police. The rate of child abuse (of all three kinds) known specifically to the police or sheriffs in the United States, is 2.2 per 1,000 and therefore considerably lower than the figure from Sweden relating to physical abuse alone. Larzelere and Johnson conclude that the evidence suggests that child abuse cannot be reduced simply by legislating against corporal punishment and add that:

It might be hypothesized that the prohibition of all spanking eliminates a type of mild spanking that prevents further escalation of aggression within disciplinary incidents.²²

	SWEDEN (1986)	UNITED STATES (1988)
Physical abuse known to the police	6.5 per 1,000	
Emotional, sexual and physical abuse known to the police		2.2 per 1,000
Physical abuse known to police, social services, education and welfare agencies		4.9-5.7 per 1,000
Emotional, sexual and physical		9.2-10.7 per 1,000

abuse known to police, social services, education and welfare agencies		
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(Comparison of rates of child abuse in Sweden and United States)

While Gelles and Edfeldt (1986) recorded that there had not been any reduction in the incidence of child abuse in Sweden subsequent to 1979, more recent figures are even more alarming. Larzelere and Johnson report that police records in Sweden show a 489% increase in the child abuse rate from 1981 to 1994.²³

Surprisingly very little work has been undertaken in Sweden to evaluate the effect of the legal ban on all forms of physical chastisement. The limited evidence available to date suggests that there is no basis for assuming that it has succeeded in protecting children from abuse or in producing a non-violent society. Quite the opposite, in fact. There are also voices claiming that the law has had a detrimental effect on family life.

So great is the public concern about the impact of the 1979 law two decades on, that two Swedish lawyers, one of whom also serves as a chief of police, are calling for a review of the legislation. While supporting a child's right to care, security and respect, they are convinced that the ban on physical discipline:

is so dangerous it *must be repealed*... The law and the courts enforce the child's rights not to be subjected to physical punishment despite what the child might have done. The law has thus given rise to absurd situations. Many parents are afraid of their children and dare not chastise them because they know that they can be reported to the police, indicted and fined or sentenced to prison... The law against the physical punishment of children is dangerous and must be repealed because it does more harm to the children than a spanking from mother or father. When the authorities - social or police - intervene in the life of a well-functioning family, its life is destroyed. There is nothing that can mend the hurt and pain and the bitterness that the authorities cause, and the children are the losers!²⁴

EPOCH frequently claim that only one parent has been prosecuted as a direct result of the 1979 legislation. However, Swedish lawyers report that while the 1979 Parenthood and Guardianship Code is rarely invoked in proceedings, the Courts no longer separate physical punishment from assault and battery. Direct appeals are therefore invariably made to the Penal Code on assault and battery. In this way, the prohibition on any form of physical punishment “has resulted in hundreds of normal parents being harassed by the social authorities and prosecuted in the Courts, sentenced and thus made criminal because they have slapped their unruly children.”²⁵

4. Research findings

The impression is given by opponents of corporal punishment that current expert opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of a total ban on all physical chastisement. But this is no more the case than it is true to say that the Swedish legislation passed in 1979 has been an unqualified success.

Elizabeth Kandel of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, refers to three distinct hypotheses on the nature of the relationship between physical punishment and aggression:

(a) Steinmetz (1979) and Maurer (1974) contended that any parental aggression, including physical punishment, may be positively and causally related to the development of anti-social aggression;

(b) DiLalla, Mitchell, Arthur & Pagliocca (1988) suggested that it is rather a *lack* of physical punishment which may contribute causally to the development of aggression;

(c) Gelles (1974) and Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder & Huesmann (1977) held that *either too little or too much* physical punishment may increase the probability of aggressive behaviour.²⁶

In 1995, Larzelere published his *Review of the Outcomes of Parental Use of Nonabusive or Customary Physical Punishment*. Having conducted a search of 166 potentially relevant peer-reviewed articles published between 1974 and 1995, he excluded studies which were either cross-sectional or which emphasised severe measures of corporal punishment. Only 18 studies were found which met the two inclusion criteria and which also limited their sample to children under the age of 13. Of these studies, no alternative method of discipline was associated with more beneficial outcomes in the child than was corporal punishment (particularly with 2-6 year-olds), and the eight strongest studies found particularly beneficial results. Dr Larzelere concluded:

The most important finding of this review is that there are not enough quality studies that document detrimental outcomes of nonabusive physical punishment to support advice or policies against this age-old parental practice... Second, many of the studies had methodological weaknesses, and the stronger ones were more likely to find beneficial outcomes of physical punishment. A particularly pervasive weakness was that no prospective or retrospective study controlled for the original frequency or

severity of child problem behaviour, which would be like studying cancer recurrences following radiation treatment without taking into account the severity or existence of the original cancer. More quality research is needed on nonabusive physical punishment...²⁷

In her response to Larzelere's *Review*, Dr Diana Baumrind of the University of California stated that:

...a blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking by parents is not scientifically supportable... [T]here is no expert consensus that spanking is a generative cause of negative outcomes in children and adults...²⁸

The common assertion that the use of physical discipline results in aggression and violence in children is not supported by the evidence. Parke and Slaby found that punishment increased children's aggression only if the punishment were severe.²⁹ Indeed, Baumrind notes:

There are curvilinear associations between frequency or intensity of corporal punishment and child aggression, with the most severely punished children among the most aggressive, but with permissive practices that eschew any kind of power assertion also associated with higher aggression. In support of this hypothesis, Lefkowitz and colleagues found that compared to very harsh or permissive parents, moderately punitive parents produced the least aggressive boys... It is probable that only certain parents, those who are hyperreactive to negative stimuli escalate to battering from disciplinary use of corporal punishment intended to discipline.³⁰

Other studies may also be cited which draw similar conclusions. Sears (1961) found that corporal punishment at the age of five tended to reduce anti-social aggression at the age of 12, and Alibrando observed that most longitudinal studies had failed to find any relationship between corporal punishment and later aggression.³¹ Trumbull and Ravenel (1996) refer to the conclusions of Dr Leonard Eron who, after a decade of longitudinal study of children, found no association between punishment (including smacking) and later aggression. They

also note that Larzelere's review of the literature concluded that any association between smacking and anti-social aggressiveness in children is insignificant and artifactual.³²

A more recent study by Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe and Carrie Lea Mariner surveyed 1112 children aged 4-11 and concluded that:

Researchers who employ contextual models contend that it is not spanking per se but rather the context in which the spanking occurs and the meaning children ascribe to spanking that predicts child outcomes.

They suggested two possible perceptions that a child may have of corporal discipline: (a) a legitimate expression of parental authority; or (b) an act of interpersonal aggression, and argued:

To the degree that spanking is perceived as the former, we do not expect parental spanking to foster child aggression. To the degree that spanking is perceived as the latter, we suspect that social learning may result in increased levels of child aggression.³³

The results of their study bore out this hypothesis and suggested that for most children, claims that physical correction teaches aggression are unfounded.

To put it at its simplest: a child's sense of justice will determine whether he accepts the discipline he receives or whether he resents it and is embittered by it. The same principle applies whether the method of correction employed is of a physical nature or not. If a child recognises his or her misbehaviour, a controlled and reasonable smack will be accepted not as an undeserved assault but as an appropriate means of correction.

In their critique of an article by Straus, Sugarman and Giles-Sims on *Spanking by parents and subsequent antisocial behaviour of children*, Ambati, Ambati and Rao note that:

since the 1950s, the prevalence and approval of [corporal punishment] in the United States has steadily declined. The same period is witness to disturbing rises in youth crime and delinquency. The sweeping conclusions of Straus et al that eliminating [corporal punishment] will reduce the level of violence in US society is based on little more than statistical quicksand and methodological thin ice. The study uses statistics much the way drunkards use lampposts: for support rather than illumination. It is a sad commentary on the state of science-society relations that this study garnered such intense global publicity instead of the careful scrutiny it deserves.³⁴

It is almost universally recognised that scientific research in the area of child discipline is fraught with difficulties. Those who campaign for a legal ban on all forms of corporal discipline of children grossly oversimplify the matter when they argue that there is a direct causal link between physical punishment and delinquency.

In a 1986 study published in the *Journal of Family Violence*, Dr Larzelere noted that:

The direction of causal influence is a thorny problem in most parenting research. This study has assumed that associations between spanking and child aggression indicate influences of the parent on the child. They could just as easily be interpreted as the child's influence on the parent. When children misbehave more, such as by being overly aggressive, parents probably tend to resort to more punishment, including physical punishment in many cases.³⁵

On an issue as emotive as the corporal discipline of children, it is perhaps inevitable that personal value judgments sometimes get in the way of objective and impartial research. Yet, as Diana Baumrind observes:

Deep value commitments should not be incompatible with the scientific method, which mandates objectivity, by which I mean truth and accuracy in reporting undeterred by personal prejudice. When value commitments include (as Straus says his does) willingness to "ignore equivocal or inconsistent evidence" or to put a "spin" on one's representation of one's own findings, then one's deep value commitments

are indeed incompatible with objective science. To quote Straus, when one “knows their theory is right” one “(up to a certain point) may ignore equivocal or inconsistent findings”. Why bother to collect data at all when one knows from the start one’s theory is right?... Values may appropriately drive one’s hypotheses and choice of problems, but empirical data must drive one’s conclusions.³⁶

Even after over 30 years of research in this area of child development, such is Dr Baumrind’s passion for truth and accuracy in scientific reporting that she is concerned to examine corporal discipline and other disciplinary strategies within a larger socialisation context before formulating an empirically based conclusion. In the meantime, she is prepared to go no further than making a “tentative hypothesis” that:

appropriately used (especially within an authoritative context) disciplinary spanking is harmless relative to alternative forms of punishment.³⁷

5. Discipline not without reason

It is perhaps surprising to note that most research on parental discipline has not distinguished the combined use of punishment and reasoning from either of them used alone. The few studies that have investigated an approach which combines punishment and reasoning as a distinct category of discipline have found it relatively effective.³⁸ Research published in 1998 found that reasoning alone was more effective when it had been combined with punishment in the recent past, suggests that the use of punishment to reinforce reasoning increases the effectiveness of verbal corrections and explanations.³⁹ Over the course of time, this approach will tend to produce the happy combination of well-behaved children and parents who have less need to correct them.

In the absence of any form of verbal explanation or reproof, there is the possibility that the child may not understand why he or she has been physically chastised. If the reason for the punishment is not clear, the child may question its legitimacy which, in turn, may breed resentment and promote discord in the parent-child relationship. Under such circumstances it is doubtful whether any positive benefit will be derived from the punishment. The use of reasoning, however, provides a rationale for the sanction. Such conclusions are supported by Dr Baumrind:

The effects of parents' disciplinary methods are mediated by the child's perception of their legitimacy. Reasoning with a child helps to legitimate parental authority, but to be maximally effective when a child disobeys, must be backed up by consequences... The use of reasoning in conjunction with power assertive methods including physical punishment can encourage internalization.⁴⁰

According to Larzelere:

the most optimal discipline response for reducing the subsequent likelihood of a target misbehaviour in toddlers was a combined use of reasoning and punishment, usually in that order.⁴¹

One of the obvious benefits of reasoning is that it specifies exactly what was wrong with the child's misbehaviour and serves to help him know what is expected of him in future. However, Larzelere's study demonstrated that reasoning alone was one of the less optimal responses and could prove counterproductive. He concluded that compliance:

is not obtained by using reasoning alone as much as possible as soon as possible, but rather by using reasoning as early as possible, but insisting on compliance and backing up that insistence with noncorporal and, if necessary, nonabusive corporal punishment during the pre-school years.⁴²

With specific reference to the use of corporal discipline as an effective back-up for milder disciplinary tactics such as reasoning, Bean & Roberts (1981) have shown that ‘time out’ was ineffective in the absence of a back-up where children fail to comply with it. Forehand & McMahon (1981), and Eyberg, Robinson, Dangel & Polster (1984) support the careful use of corporal discipline as a back-up to ‘time out’ for children aged nine years and under, and McMahon & Wells (1990) reported that, as a back-up, smacking had proven empirically to be a more effective back-up than any alternative.⁴³

In a more recent study, Dr Larzelere asked the mothers of 2 and 3 year-olds to record each occurrence of disobedience or fighting over a four week period, together with details of the discipline tactics they employed. One major finding was that “the combined use of reasoning and punishment was more effective in delaying misbehaviour recurrences than was either one alone.” Larzelere also found that another advantage of the reasoning-punishment combination was that it enhanced the subsequent effectiveness of reasoning when used by itself:

Three different analyses of my data showed that disciplinary reasoning with 2- and 3-year-olds was ineffective unless it was backed up with punishment periodically. The children whose behaviour improved the most over the next 20 months were those whose mothers frequently used reasoning alone (i.e. without punishment), but also backed up the reasoning with punishment when necessary. In contrast, the children whose behaviour deteriorated the most had mothers who frequently used reasoning alone, but rarely backed it up with punishment.⁴⁴

Furthermore, research has shown that a balanced and prudent combination of reasoning backed up with an appropriate physical sanction, is effective in decreasing the frequency of misbehaviour recurrences with pre-school children. According to Trumbull and Ravenell:

spanking, as an effective enforcer of time-out is a component of several well-researched parent training programmes and popular parenting texts.⁴⁵

The authors of a study on *The Effects of Discipline Responses in Delaying Toddler Misbehaviour Recurrences* recorded that ordinary smacking turned out to be more effective than expected in delaying the next misbehaviour recurrence, especially when combined with reasoning.⁴⁶

In fact, the mean delay before a misbehaviour recurrence was significantly longer after a punishment-reasoning combination than after punishment alone, reasoning alone, or a response involving neither punishment nor reasoning. They further noted that every study that has trained parents to use moderate corporal discipline as a back-up for a milder disciplinary response not involving a physical sanction, has found that it is effective in reducing the subsequent misbehaviour frequency and in increasing the subsequent effectiveness of the noncorporal discipline response. Contrary to the claims of those who cite the “meagre and mostly correlational” evidence against ordinary, nonabusive corporal discipline, they concluded that the optimal combination for toddlers is a relatively balanced combination of power assertion and induction (reasoning), whereas the optimal balance should shift toward more reasoning and less power assertion as the child grows up.⁴⁷

This confirms the experience of generations of parents who have found that where physical correction is used reasonably and appropriately in the early years, it is needed less as children grow older.

6. Correction in context

In order to assess the effectiveness and consequences of any one aspect of child-rearing, it is important to take a broad view of the general parent-child relationship. It is a hazardous exercise to divorce a single aspect of a child's nurture from the overall context and draw conclusions on which to base social policy. It is therefore particularly worthy of note that those studies most frequently appealed to by opponents of corporal discipline in support of its abolition, invariably fail to investigate the context in which a physical sanction is used when discussing its effects. Where a more holistic view is taken, research demonstrates the positive effects of corporal discipline when consistently administered within the context of a warm, caring and loving parent-child relationship.

So, for example, Dr Diana Baumrind, in a decade-long study of families with children aged three to nine, found that parents who balanced firm discipline strategies (including occasional smacking) with positive encouragement, experienced the most favourable outcome in their children. Less successful were those parents who either used excessive punishment with less encouragement, or who adopted a more permissive style, using little in the way of punishment and no physical chastisement. Baumrind concluded that evidence from this study:

did not indicate that negative reinforcement or corporal punishment *per se* were harmful or ineffective procedures, but rather the total patterns of parental control determined the effects on the child of these procedures.⁴⁸

In fact, the four-year-old children in Baumrind's studies demonstrated greater maturity if they had authoritative parents than if they had either authoritarian or permissive parents. Maturity was indicated by "altruistic co-operation, friendliness, independence,

explorativeness, and contentedness” in a nursery school. Of the three types of parenting posited (authoritarian, authoritative and permissive), authoritative parents were average in their use of physical correction, emphasised reasoning, showed a caring interest in their children, and encouraged them in the development of their personal skills and autonomy. Such a parenting style proved beneficial to the children.⁴⁹

In a study published over twenty years later, in 1996, Dr Baumrind wrote that in the absence of sufficient theoretical and empirical research, there was no basis for concluding that “mild disciplinary spanking causes hostile aggression, alienation or pathology in children” or in the parent-child relationship.” Rather, she asserted, “the short- and long-term effects of corporal punishment, or any other disciplinary practice within the normative range, depend for their effects on the cultural and child rearing contexts in which the practice is embedded.”⁵⁰

Larzelere similarly notes:

Reactive discipline is not implemented in a relational vacuum, so other aspects of the parent-child relationship are vitally important. The optimal parent should be communicating love and nurturance to a child at a level that can be understood, reinforcing positive behaviour, communicating well, using appropriate problem-solving skills, being sensitive to underlying needs the child may be expressing via misbehaviour and being flexible in using a range of discipline responses as opposed to rigidly using one or two responses that change only in intensity.⁵¹

Alibrando’s study into the effects of corporal punishment investigated the parameters of smacking frequency, prominence, intensity and orientation. By ‘spanking orientation’, he referred to the manner and spirit with which the corporal discipline was administered. His findings supported those of Larzelere et al in 1989 who found that parents who smacked their children to release their own tensions (“parent-oriented spanking”) were more likely to have children who reported lower self-esteem, whereas parents who smacked their child with the child’s best interests in mind (“child-oriented spanking”) had children who tended to report higher self-esteem.⁵²

It is with this in mind that Baumrind asserted that:

It is necessary to distinguish between prudent and imprudent use of punishment, and between offensive and defensive aggression in identifying the causes of negative child outcomes.⁵³

In this connection, she referred to an experimental set of studies by Rosen, O’Leary, Conway & Pfinner (1984), which document:

the importance of prudent negative consequences for maintaining the appropriate behaviour of hyperactive students. Prudent negative consequences... within the context of a positive teacher-student relationship were extremely effective in shaping appropriate social and academic behaviours and were necessary on an ongoing basis to control inappropriate behaviour of hyperactive students. Positive consequences did not suffice and imprudent negative consequences were counterproductive.

In this set of studies, “prudent negative consequences” were defined as “consistent, immediate, calm, private and specific”, while “imprudent negative consequences” were defined as “reprimands delivered late, inconsistently, explosively, publicly and non-specifically.”

In the judgment of Dr Baumrind, after over thirty years of research into this area of child development:

Disciplinary spanking in the home, used prudently, can shape socially constructive behaviour thereby protecting children from the natural and more painful consequences of misbehaviour occurring outside the nurturant family setting... Physical punishment is least likely to cause negative consequences and most likely to be effective in deterring unacceptable behaviour when administered without guilt, under controlled circumstances in a measured fashion, where both parent and child are aware of the reason for its use, when administered in private for wilful defiance

rather than for childish irresponsibility, and not in children younger than 18 months or subsequent to puberty.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The effectiveness of physical chastisement as a discipline strategy depends upon a variety of factors: its association with reasoning, the spirit, manner and consistency with which it is administered, the overall context of the parent-child relationship, and the extent to which the child perceives that it is for his benefit rather than as a means of expressing frustration on the part of the parent. The experience of countless generations of parents, combined with the findings of the best research studies, methodologically speaking, leads to the conclusion that caring physical discipline, consistently applied within the context of a warm parent-child relationship, administered with love and self-control, and accompanied by words of explanation and reproof, is an invaluable means of teaching a child right from wrong and promoting good behaviour.

Baumrind's research at the University of California (1973) found that parents who used moderate punishment, including smacking, produced children who were not only more mature than liberally reared children, but were also "superior in all measures of social responsibility". Such parents were also found to use ridicule, fear and withdrawal of love less than other parents - which would account for their children's confidence and well-being.⁵⁵

Larzelere's more recent review concurs with Baumrind's findings:

Parents who obtained better outcomes associated with physical punishment were positively involved with their child, had child-oriented motivations for using spanking rather than parent-oriented motivations, did not increase their children's fear of parental discipline, followed through with their warnings, and co-operated with each other in discipline responsibilities. They did not use verbal put-downs and changed

their main discipline method to grounding when their children got older... Grounding (for older children) was the only alternative discipline response that had more beneficial outcomes than did physical punishment.⁵⁶

The inadvisability of legislating against the use of physical chastisement by parents is further reinforced by findings which suggest that such a measure may, in fact, contribute to an increase of violence and abuse against children rather than reduce it.

Significantly, Baumrind (1973) reported that those parents who were the least likely to use corporal discipline, were the most likely to report:

explosive attacks of rage in which they inflicted more pain or injury upon the child than they had intended... Permissive parents apparently became violent because they felt that they could neither control the child's behaviour nor tolerate its effect upon themselves.⁵⁷

It is therefore with some justification that Larzelere suggests:

it could be that prohibiting all spanking eliminates the type of mild spanking that serves to maintain control before escalating into a coercive cycle of violence (Patterson 1982). Using a mild spanking as a back-up for less aversive discipline responses subsequently makes those less aversive responses more effective by themselves, thereby avoiding the coercive cycle of violence further (Day & Roberts 1983; Roberts 1988; Roberts & Powers 1990; Sather 1992).⁵⁸

This would account for the reported rise in the rates of both physical child abuse and youth violence in Sweden since corporal discipline was outlawed there in 1979. Where parents are deprived of a sanction which, when appropriately used, will nip problem behaviour in the bud, the result will be that their children run the risk of becoming out of control and the parents reach breaking point, when they are inclined to act in a manner which is neither moderate nor reasonable.

There is mounting evidence to suggest that a lack of parental control is a major factor in the increase in youth crime. In this connection, it is of interest to note that the recent Gallup report *Youth Crime in the 90s*, found that 66% of parents were finding it more difficult to discipline their children because of fear of being accused of abuse. The same survey found that 82% wanted greater parental power to discipline children without fear of prosecution. The report concluded that:

Less trendy theory, return to corporal punishment, return to disciplinary fatherhood are measures that would have popular adult support.⁵⁹

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