

Physical Punishment and Discipline (including smacking)

Reviewed October 2004

Paediatricians and other child health professionals can play a vital role in changing attitudes and behaviour in relation to the physical abuse of children carried out under the guise of punishment or discipline. Society's views on physical punishment are not consistent. **Although some people may consider it acceptable for adults to hit children as a form of discipline, society acknowledges that it is unacceptable for adults to hit one another.** Physical punishment is no longer tolerated as a form of routine discipline in schools.

Studies in **Australia and elsewhere** show that most parents smack their children^[1]. One study in the **United States of America** found that 94% of parents had physically punished their toddlers in the previous 12 months, and 35% had hit their babies^[2].

The Paediatrics & Child Health Division believes that **the use of force, either physical force and/or psychological threats**, is an ineffective and unhelpful method of punishment and discipline of children.

A **systematic review**^[3] on the short and long-term effects of corporal (or physical) punishment concluded that although children are more likely to comply with adults' demands following physical punishment in the short term, they do not actually learn the desired good behaviour. **The review concluded that** repeated and escalating levels of physical punishment **may** then occur in the longer term to force the children to maintain the good behaviour. This increases the risk of physical injury to children, may lead to severe child abuse and reinforces in children a model of parenting which relies on physical punishment.

Other studies show that the use of physical punishment is associated with a range of negative consequences including^[3,4]:

- increases in physical abuse
- increased prevalence of disruptive behaviour - Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder
- long term anti-social behaviour
- later in life, the abuse of a partner or child
- anxiety disorders
- alcohol abuse or dependence

There are many reasons why parents physically punish their children. Parents often lose their temper and don't know how to manage the situation^[5]. One study^[6] found that in families there was an association between poor marital relationships and severe punishment of children.

Alternative methods of discipline*, which are far more effective and beneficial for children, include^[7]:

- parents responding positively, rewarding desired behaviour combined with ignoring undesirable behaviour; and,
- setting appropriate limits and applying fair consequences for breaking them, related logically to the misdemeanour where possible.

Sweden banned all forms of physical punishment in 1979, and research^[8,9], suggests that this has led to reduced child mortality as a result of physical abuse, a decline in public support for physical punishment, an increase in the identification of children at risk and improved social services which are more supportive and preventive. There are currently 11 nation states, which have full abolition by law of physical punishment^[10]. In Australia, physical punishment is banned in state schools in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), South Australia (SA) and Victoria, and in all schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Tasmania^[10].

Paediatricians and other child health professionals can assist parents to develop methods of discipline for children that are far more effective and beneficial than the use of physical force.

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† access to this link may be restricted

Note: this is an edited extract of the booklet 'Protecting Children is Everybody's Business: Paediatricians Responding to the Challenge of Child Abuse', 2nd edition, published by The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 2001.

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