



Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Position Statement on corporal punishment

Summary

Corporal punishment in children has both short term and long term adverse effects and in principle should not be used since it models an approach which is discouraged between adults. Other means of discipline are equally effective but of much greater learning value to the child. Currently the law in Britain allows smacking of children by their parents as long as it does not produce a bruise. Several attempts have been made to change the law to give children the same protection as adults against assault but these have failed. 19 countries in Europe have now banned corporal punishment by parents and the RCPCH is part of the campaign in the UK to follow their example. RCPCH supports the case for changing the law to change the UK culture towards more positive parenting.

Introduction

Corporal punishment of children in the home is of importance to paediatricians because of its connection with child abuse. Many of the serious cases reported in recent years have been children who were smacked or beaten by their parents, and all paediatricians will have seen children who have been injured as a result of parental chastisement. It is not possible logically to differentiate between a smack and a physical assault since both are forms of violence. The motivation behind the smack cannot reduce the hurtful impact it has on the child. Prevention of child maltreatment is of vital importance, and relies on improving relationships between parents and their children.

The RCPCH paper on 'Helpful Parenting' covered the characteristics of parents who provide an optimal environment for nurturing their child effectively. The key features are the provision of loving support together with control which includes limit setting and the positive reinforcement of good behaviour. Societies which promote the needs and rights of children have a low incidence of child maltreatment, and this includes a societal rejection of physical punishment of children. Widespread information and education will assist in bringing about such a society. Many believe that there is a strong case also for the law to recognize this by making physical assault of children illegal. Currently 17 countries in Europe have such legislation, and this position is supported by the RCPCH.

Evidence

The evidence on methods use for improving behaviour is covered in the American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;101/4/723>

Smacking is no more effective as a long-term strategy than other approaches¹, and reliance on smacking as a discipline approach makes other discipline strategies less effective to use².

Smacking children <18 months of age increases the chance of physical injury, and the child is unlikely to understand the connection between the behaviour and the punishment. Although smacking may result in a reaction of shock by the child and cessation of the undesired behaviour, repeated smacking may cause agitated, aggressive behaviour in the child that may lead to physical altercation between parent and child.^{3,4}

Smacking models aggressive behaviour as a solution to conflict and has been associated with increased aggression in preschool and school children.⁵ A pattern of smacking may be sustained or increased. Because smacking may provide the parent some relief from anger, the likelihood that the parent will smack the child in the future is increased⁴.

The more children are smacked, the more anger they report as adults, the more likely they are to smack their own children, the more likely they are to approve of hitting a spouse, and the more marital conflict they experience as adults⁶

Smacking children is counter to the precepts of the UN Convention on the Rights of the child which confers protection against violence, and was condemned in the UN Secretary General's report on violence against children.⁷

There are well supported and evidenced methods of improving children's behaviour and developing pro-social attitudes and these are covered in the RCPCH paper on Helpful Parenting.⁸ Changing the law in Sweden has had beneficial effects on the prevalence of child abuse⁹

Policy context

Currently, physical punishment is allowed in the UK as long as no 'actual bodily harm' is caused. The Children Act (2004) states in section 58 that 'Battery of a child causing actual bodily harm to the child cannot be justified in any civil proceedings on the ground that it constituted reasonable punishment.'

There have been a number of attempts to change this law but the Government has not allowed a free vote of Labour party members, even

though it appears that there may be a majority of Labour MPs who are in favour of giving children the same protection as adults against assault.

In December 2007 a consultation was held on the controversial section 58 and though most children's sector organizations were against the clause and in favour of a complete ban, the government made no changes.

In their joint submission (June 2008) to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child - the Children's Commissioners for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland highlighted the continued legality of physical punishment of children as a "serious violation" of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In October 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child stated in its concluding observations on the UK: "The Committee is concerned at the failure of the State party to explicitly prohibit all corporal punishment in the home and emphasises its view that the existence of any defence in cases of corporal punishment of children does not comply with the principles and provisions of the Convention, since it would suggest that some forms of corporal punishment are acceptable."

There are campaigning organizations in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see resources, below) which lobby for a change in the law to give children the same protection as adults against assault.

The RCPCH is a member of the *Children are Unbeatable! Alliance* which campaigns in England and at Westminster.

The Children Are Unbeatable! Alliance campaigns for the UK to satisfy human rights obligations by modernising the law on assault to afford children the same protection as adults.

The College View

The RCPCH considers that corporal punishment of children in whatever form (smacking, tapping, hitting or beating) is hurtful, unnecessary and likely to be harmful either physically or emotionally; that it is not practicable to distinguish between different forms of corporal punishment, either between different parts of the body that are smacked, or between different outcomes (eg bruising vs non-bruising). Corporal punishment should not be accepted as a component of good parenting, and every effort should be made to ensure that all parents are educated, informed and supported to care for their children using acceptable forms of discipline and boundary setting.

Recommendations

1. The RCPCH believes that corporal punishment of children should not play a part in the discipline of children by their parents owing to the negative message it conveys in relation to the benefits of violence and the harmful adverse long term effects on children.

2. RCPCH is in favour of positive parenting with clear limit setting and guidance in a context of loving support; pro-social behaviour will be best achieved by clear modelling within the family.

3. A change in the law is desirable to remove the 'reasonable punishment' clause and give children the same protection as adults; the goals of the Children are Unbeatable alliance are supported.

4. At the time of any change in the law, there should be widespread public education on methods of positive parenting, as happened in Sweden after their change in their law

5. The College encourages its members to speak to MPs and other key decision makers, to ensure that they are appraised of the adverse health effects of corporal punishment.

Resources/aknowledge

England: <http://www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk/pages/action.html>

Wales: Children are Unbeatable Cymru
www.childreninwales.org.uk/2401.html

Ireland: <http://www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk/pages/ni.html>

Scotland: <http://www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk/pages/scotland.html>

[AAP policy statement](#)

References

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