

The Discipline and Guidance of Children: A Summary of Research

Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago,
and Office of the Children's Commissioner

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Foreword

The Discipline and Guidance
of Children Research Review
by Children's Issues Centre,
Commissioned by the
Children's Commissioner,
June 2004.

This summary of a review of research commissioned by my Office in 2003, is intended to provide parents and professionals with important information about the effects of physical punishment on children's behaviour and well-being.

The report is timely as we debate about how to better protect our children, in light of a damaging UNICEF report titled *A League Table of Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations*, which shows that New Zealand fares poorly with high rates of maltreatment of children.

There is also a growing debate about the numbers of children killed or seriously hurt by adults who should be caring for them. Much of this public debate revolves around repeal of section 59 of the Crimes Act that allows reasonable physical force to be used when disciplining children.

Section 59 stands in stark contrast to other legislation, which bans physical force between adults and stops humans hurting animals. The reason given for keeping section 59 is a belief by some that parents and caregivers need to be able to physically punish children in order to teach them how to behave.

This research review finds that this is a false hope. Firstly, most research confirms that the use of physical punishment increases the likelihood of disruptive or 'bad' behaviour among children. Secondly, it is experienced by children as anger from adults and is rarely associated with 'good' feelings or lessons. Thirdly, it demonstrates the absurdity of trying to find 'safe' levels of hitting.

We can get ourselves into all sorts of arguments about the place of physical punishment in raising children, but this summary of international and national research shows that it boils down to simple lessons. Children do well when they are given clear guidelines about how to live their lives in a consistent, supportive and authoritative (not authoritarian) manner. Conversely, they do badly when these things are absent or where repeated or extreme physical punishment is used.

It is a sad indictment on our society when so many children experience violence with such regularity and severity; often at the hands of the very people who should most protect and care for them. In 1999, Dr Peter Watson found that homicide was the third leading cause of death for those aged 0-14 years of age in New Zealand. Drowning and motor vehicle crashes (including pedestrian) deaths were first and second.

Clearly, we need to face up to what's going on in New Zealand in order to change it. These problems are not isolated incidents, but are often associated with stress generated by poverty, lack of support, ignorance, or failure to recognize that children have rights too.

This review forms an important evidence base for this debate in New Zealand. I welcome it and thank the Children's Issues Centre for a superb job in bringing this together in such a comprehensive and informative way. Let's work together as a society to stop violence against children.



Dr Cindy Kiro
CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER



The Purpose of this Report

This report has been written for everyone who is interested in children's well-being, especially parents and the professionals who work with them. It is a summary of the international research evidence about the discipline and guidance of children, including physical punishment. It provides information for parents and for the professionals who support parents, so that a common understanding of the risks and benefits of different family disciplinary practices can start to develop.

The most important reason for putting these research messages into the public arena, however, is that what happens in families during childhood has a lifelong effect on children's happiness and success. As many as possible of Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse children should be given the chance of fulfilling their potential and leading productive lives.

Public health messages, in our view, can change people's thinking and actions, and these should be based on the best research evidence available. The Government wants parents to have access to information which will support positive family disciplinary practices. This report will, we hope, contribute to that goal.



This work was carried out by four researchers, Anne Smith, Nicola Taylor, Megan Gollop and Kate Marshall, from the Children’s Issues Centre at the University of Otago, under contract to the Office of the Children’s Commissioner. A reference group consisting of members of government departments, non government organizations and academic institutions¹ also provided advice and feedback to the researchers to guide their work.

This report provides a succinct summary of part of a much longer and more detailed report we have produced, designed for an academic and policy audience, which will be available either from the Children’s Issues Centre or from the Office of the Children’s Commissioner². The report is based on an extensive search of recent published material in the peer-reviewed national and international research literature on family discipline. The researchers are all parents and two are also grandparents. Their backgrounds are diverse, including fields such as child development, education, psychology, counselling, social work and law.

The Authors and their Methods

The New Zealand Context

It has always been said that New Zealand is a great place to bring up children, but the reality is that it can also be a tough environment for some children.

We have a beautiful spacious country, at peace with its neighbours, a plentiful supply of food and shelter and a mild climate. Māori are an articulate and passionate indigenous people, and social justice issues are kept to the forefront of our minds through the partnership between Māori and the Crown, based on the Treaty of Waitangi. A diverse array of cultures provides a rich mosaic of types of family life in New Zealand. We have some very good services for children and families. For example, we have almost universal provision of early childhood services for four-year-olds (unusual on the world stage), which is supported by government funding. New Zealand achieves well in international reading achievement comparisons such as the International Education Achievement and the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study. In 2002 the government published a plan for New Zealand children called *Agenda for Children* which showed its commitment to improving life for children. One of the action areas in that plan is reducing violence in the lives of children.

The other side of the story is that New Zealand has a big gap between the rich and the poor. We have the fifth highest gap in the OECD (Organisation of Economic and Social Development)³ between the wealthiest and the poorest families, and about a third of families with children are living in poverty. Financial hardship increases the likelihood (but does not make it inevitable) that family discipline may become harsh. There are also some worrying statistics about the extent of child abuse and neglect. For example, a recent UNICEF report showed that New Zealand had the third highest rate of deaths from child homicide in the OECD⁴. A number of child advocacy groups⁵ have expressed concern that there is a very long way to go between the statements in *Agenda for Children* and a real commitment to resource allocation for their implementation. There are some inequities in services for children and families according to ethnicity. For example, Māori and Pacific children are less likely to be participating in early childhood services than Pākehā children, more Māori and Pacific families are on low incomes and are less likely to own their own homes, and there are higher rates of meningococcal disease and accidental injuries among Pacific and Māori than in Pākehā children⁶.




Most New Zealand parents have smacked or physically punished (see definition on page 10) their children at one time or other. Several studies have⁷ shown that about half of New Zealand parents smack their children at least once a week, and the majority think that it is alright to smack children in some circumstances.

There is no evidence, however, to support the often expressed view that Māori or Pacific people are more accepting of physical punishment. In fact one recent study⁸ showed that European New Zealanders were more likely than Māori or Pacific people to think that physical punishment of children should continue to be legally sanctioned.

Parents are generally more accepting of the view that hitting preschoolers is more acceptable than hitting teenagers. Many parents are not particularly happy with the effectiveness of physical punishment or with the distress it causes, and say that they used it because they did not know what else to do.

Because the law shapes peoples' ideas about the boundaries and limitations on the use of physical punishment, it is important to look at New Zealand law. Section 59 of the Crimes Act (1961) says that parents are justified in "using force by way of correction of a child if the force used is reasonable in the circumstances". Parents who are prosecuted for assaulting a child can use section 59 as a "statutory defence" (or an excuse) in law, provided they meet the legal criteria and a judge or jury agrees. A similar provision used to allow teachers to use corporal punishment with children, but this was abolished in 1989.

Parents have successfully used section 59 to be acquitted of an assault charge in cases where they have hit a child with a bamboo stick, a belt, a hosepipe, a piece of wood and in one case where a child was chained to metal chairs to prevent him leaving the house⁹. These actions were all judged by juries to be a reasonable and therefore lawful means of discipline towards children. Other instances of corporal punishment have, however, been found to be unreasonable (usually by judges) but there is inconsistency, and no commonly understood 'objective' definition of 'reasonable force'. The values and beliefs of the legal profession and of juries undoubtedly have an influence on how family disciplinary practices are judged. There is an ongoing debate - with strong views being expressed by either side - about whether it is time for section 59 to be repealed. This debate is one of the reasons that we wrote this report and we hope that it will contribute to more informed decision making.



There is no evidence, however, to support the often expressed view that Māori or Pacific people are more accepting of physical punishment. In fact one recent study showed that European New Zealanders were more likely than Māori or Pacific people to think that physical punishment of children should continue to be legally sanctioned.



The International Context

Our country is part of an international community and has demonstrated its commitment to the rights and well-being of children by signing and then ratifying (in 1993) the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). This is an International Treaty composed of 54 articles which covers the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of children. Article 19 is particularly relevant to the issue of section 59 and family disciplinary practices, and it states that children should be protected “from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation”.¹⁰

The New Zealand government has to report to a committee at the United Nations in Geneva on what it is doing to fulfil its commitment to UNCROC. It did so in 1995 and again in 2000. The UN Committee considers our government’s reports (as well as reports from non government organisations) and then provides a statement of its Concluding Observations to the New Zealand government. In both their 1997 and 2003 Concluding Observations the UN Committee has been critical of New Zealand for the “continuing authorization provided by section 59 of the Crimes Act to use physical force against children as punishment within the family” (in the first report, 1997). In its response to the second report (in 2003) the UN Committee said that it was “deeply concerned” that no review of section 59 had taken place. The government has responded by putting efforts into a “public education strategy to shift attitudes and change behaviours on physical discipline of children”.¹¹ It has undertaken to review section 59 in December 2005.

Eleven countries have abolished **all** corporal punishment of children - Sweden (1979), Finland (1983), Denmark (1986, and more explicitly in 1997), Norway (1987), Austria (1989), Cyprus (1994), Latvia (1998), Croatia (1999), Israel (2000), Germany (2000) and, most recently, Iceland (2003). Generally, this has meant these countries initially prohibited the use of corporal punishment within schools, followed by the later removal of their defence to parental assaults from their criminal law. Several countries have also amended their civil child protection legislation to prohibit corporal punishment by parents.

A number of other countries - Italy, Belgium, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales - have recently given, or are currently giving, consideration to the physical punishment of children and whether or not reform of their law is desirable.

Closer to New Zealand, New South Wales introduced the Crimes Amendment (Child Protection Physical Mistreatment) Act in 2001. This specifies to which parts of a child’s body force can be applied, and that it should not harm the child more than briefly. Various options for reform have been proposed in Tasmania ranging from clarification of the law to abolishing the defence of allowing a parent to use reasonable force to correct a child.

All US states, except Minnesota, regard physical punishment as a defence to a charge of assault. The law varies from state to state, with various factors having to be taken into account including the child’s age, personality and level of understanding, the necessity of the force, the amount of force used and the circumstances surrounding this, the risk of injury to the child, and the parent’s intention.

The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment

Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behaviour is unacceptable and other behaviour is acceptable. Negative discipline focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid being hurt.

Discipline is guidance of children's moral, emotional and physical development, enabling children to take responsibility for themselves when they are older.¹² It involves making children aware of the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and teaches them the values and actions which are acceptable in their family and society. Discipline can be positive, for example, praising the child for doing something good or for stopping doing something inappropriate. Or discipline can be negative, for example smacking a child for doing something wrong. Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behaviour is unacceptable and other behaviour is acceptable. Negative discipline focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid being hurt or punished.

Another distinction is often made between 'power assertive' and 'inductive' discipline. Power assertive disciplinary methods involve following children's inappropriate behaviour with a negative consequence (smacking, threats, withdrawal of privileges) without explanation or justification. Inductive methods involve limit setting and setting up logical consequences, with reasoning, and explanation.¹³

Physical or corporal punishment is the use of force to cause pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control.¹⁴ Although researchers attempt to distinguish between physical punishment and abuse, this is very hard to do and there is no general agreement about the dividing line between physical punishment and physical abuse. There is evidence that if physical punishment is a frequent mode of family discipline it can escalate into physical abuse. About two thirds of a sample of physically abused children came from families who relied on physical punishment as a mode of discipline in one study.¹⁵ The main difference between abusive and non abusive parents is how often and how severely they physically punish their child.



Challenges Faced

when Doing Research on Family Discipline and Punishment

Doing research on family discipline is not straightforward. It is best to study behaviour in its natural context within the family, and this is complicated and difficult. To find out what is going on in families we have relied on reports from parents, professionals, or observers (and occasionally children in the small number of studies in which they have been asked). People's own accounts are often inaccurate because memories of events during childhood may be unreliable and participants present only one view of what happened. Observers are also not in a good position to really know what goes on in families. If they try to observe in home settings they may influence what is going on there. If they rely on structured survey questions these can be excessively oversimplified and ignore potentially important information. If they rely on responses to hypothetical vignettes or stories about what might happen in families, these may not have much to do with how parents actually discipline their own children.

The biggest difficulty in research on family discipline is being certain about what is the cause of children's behaviour. A lot of studies measure family discipline and practice and look at the relationship of discipline to children's behaviour (for example, aggressive behaviour towards peers, or compliance with parents' directions). The assumption is usually made that the parents' behaviour causes the children's behaviour. In most cases an equally plausible explanation is that the child's behaviour (such as aggression towards siblings) actually causes parents to punish.

Recent studies on physical punishment have been able to measure behaviour over several periods of time, giving more confidence that changes in child behaviour are caused by the intervening family discipline processes. For example, children's aggressive behaviour could be measured at one time, and the parents' disciplinary practices measured over a subsequent time period (say over a year), and children's aggressive behaviour assessed at the end of the year. If the increase in aggression is associated with how much the parents physically punished the child between the first and second assessment of aggression, researchers can be much more confident that the physical punishment actually caused the increase in aggression. There are now several studies which do use these methods.¹⁶

Theories about Family Discipline

The longer version of this report explains in more detail the theoretical ideas which lie behind why particular methods of family discipline are effective and others are not.

The following theories have a contribution to make:

1 ~+~ Sociocultural Theory:

Children tend to internalize and control their thinking and actions, according to the sort of interactions they have experienced. When children experience pain and negativity from their caregivers they are likely to internalise these modes of interaction and use them to guide their own actions.

2 ~+~ Attachment Theory:

Attachment describes the relationships children develop towards responsive caregivers. Excessive use of negative discipline, such as physical punishment, threatens secure attachment, risks that children will feel unloved, have difficulty with relationships, and have negative feelings (such as anger or hostility) towards their parents. Children who have secure attachments with their parents are more likely to develop a conscience and control their own behaviour.

3 ~+~ Behavioural Theory:

This emphasizes the importance of consequence and models for behaviour. Parents using physical punishment provides children with aggressive models and encourages them to use aggression to control others. Consistently rewarding 'good' behaviour and ignoring or mildly punishing bad behaviour is the best way of achieving compliance.

4 ~+~ Ecological Theory:

This suggests that the wider environment affects family discipline. For example, parents who are under stress, living in difficult circumstances, and not receiving social support are more likely to physically punish their children.

5 ~+~ Sociology of Childhood:

Childhood is what we think it is or ought to be, and this influences the expectations we have for children. Children are now thought of as social actors who can understand and contribute meaningfully to their family and community. Their views should be listened to and respected.



The Effects of Physical Punishment

Gershoff points out that most parents are interested not only in immediate compliance, but also in ongoing compliance and her other results show that this does not necessarily happen, and that there are other negative effects of corporal punishment.

Immediate Effects:

Most parents are looking for short-term effects when they punish children, and whether the physical punishment ‘works’ immediately is often the key thing that they are concerned about. Research has looked at whether physical punishment works in making children do what they are told (compliance). In this report we will mention a few key studies – readers who want more detail of further studies can look at our longer report.

In one important study, Elizabeth Gershoff⁷ analysed 92 different studies on the effect of corporal punishment and looked at its effect on 11 different outcomes for children. The only **desirable** outcome that corporal punishment was linked to was compliance. Three out of five studies she looked at showed that corporal punishment did lead to compliance and two did not show this link. The studies suggesting that corporal punishment worked in the short-term included mainly children who had problem behaviour. Gershoff points out that most parents are interested not only in immediate compliance, but also in ongoing compliance and her other results show that this does not necessarily happen, and that there are other negative effects of corporal punishment.

Another researcher, Robert Larzelere,⁸ challenged Gershoff on how she selected the studies she reviewed – on the grounds, for example, that she included studies on severe physical punishment rather than restricting her review to mild or moderate punishment. Larzelere re-analysed the studies, and omitted the ones he did not think were appropriate, which reduced the number of studies reviewed to 16. The results showed that six of the studies (mostly involving children with major behaviour problems) found positive effects of physical punishment, such as less fighting and aggression, and in one case enhanced parental affection. Five of the studies found negative effects while the remaining three showed both positive and negative outcomes. Larzelere⁹ says that smacking is only appropriate under the following conditions: for 2 to 6 year old children; not severe; the punisher is under control; accompanied by reasoning; carried out privately; and motivated by concern for the child. In our view this begs the question about where the dividing line between mild and severe punishment lies.

Larzelere’s view that physical punishment is appropriate in some conditions is a minority view amongst researchers, and it should **not** be taken as an appropriate guide for parental behaviour. There is very little support in the research for the view that physical punishment ‘works’ to achieve immediate compliance. The research findings are very mixed on this, and the conditions under which the proponents argue it is an effective method are very different from what happens in ordinary families. There is also the additional problem that there is a built-in risk of escalation with the use of physical punishment, which means that it tends to get more severe with continued use, and this increases its dangers for children²⁰. Achieving immediate compliance also does not necessarily mean that children will obey the parental rules next time.

There are other methods which can be used to achieve compliance which do not have the negative long-term effects associated with physical punishment, such as time-out or withdrawal of privileges. Even Larzelere²¹ acknowledges that other disciplinary practices (for example, reasoning) can be as effective as physical punishment. These practices are discussed under the section on effective discipline.

Long-Term Effects:

What is really worrying about the research findings on physical punishment is what they show in the long-term. There is overwhelming consistency in the findings of many studies indicating that long-term, parental use of physical punishment is associated with negative outcomes for children's behaviour. Relationships are linear – that is mild punishment has some bad effects but more severe punishment is associated with much more adverse outcomes. While the use of physical punishment does not guarantee a negative outcome, it is definitely a risk factor for the development of problem behaviour.

Corporal punishment has unintended consequences which are not easily seen.

These include:

- teaching children to avoid being caught
- endorsing giving pain to change other people's behaviour
- reducing the possibility of influencing children through example or discussion
- making the forbidden more attractive
- teaching children to be egocentric (because they learn through avoiding pain)²².

The research findings on the long-term effects of physical punishment are remarkably consistent and mostly negative²³. Elizabeth Gershoff concluded from her review of 92 studies on physical punishment that 91 percent of the analyses:

indicate parental corporal punishment is associated with the following undesirable behaviours and experiences: decreased moral internalization, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behaviour, decreased quality of relationship between parent and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behaviour, decreased adult mental health, and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. Corporal punishment was associated with only one desirable behaviour, namely, increased immediate compliance²⁴.

Those who defend corporal punishment want to dismiss these findings on the grounds that they do not establish a causal link between smacking and problem behaviour. There are now, however, five prospective studies (where children's behaviour is observed at different points in time) which all show the long-term negative effect of corporal punishment²⁵. In these studies, higher rates of misbehaviour occurred two and four years later for children who were smacked versus those who experienced little or no corporal punishment.



That punishment has such a serious adverse influence on social behaviour is a cause for concern, since we know its lifelong importance for friendship, sexual partnerships, mental health, ability to access social support and other processes which build human potential. Social development is also inseparable from intellectual development, since relationships and positive interactions are integral to the development of thinking.



The following are some of the negative developmental outcomes associated with parental use of smacking:

1 ↪ Social Behaviour:

Aggressive, disruptive, delinquent, and antisocial behaviour, violent offending, being the victim of violence, and low peer status are associated with children being physically punished. Ironically the behaviour which parents are most likely to want to prevent when they physically punish children, is exactly the behaviour that they are encouraging. The literature is quite consistent in supporting the conclusion that there is an association between the use of parental corporal punishment, (especially when parents are impulsive, overreactive and power assertive in their discipline), and the development of antisocial behaviour in children. That punishment has such a serious adverse influence on social behaviour is a cause for concern, since we know its lifelong importance for friendship, sexual partnerships, mental health, ability to access social support and other processes which build human potential. Social development is also inseparable from intellectual development, since relationships and positive interactions are integral to the development of thinking.

2 ↪ Intellectual Development:

Physical punishment is associated with poorer academic achievement, lower IQ, poorer performance on standardised achievement tests, poorer adjustment to school, more ADHD-like symptoms, and poorer self esteem. Seven studies link exposure to physical punishment with poorer performance on intellectual tasks²⁶. The presence of emotional support for parents, or parents providing extra intellectual stimulation to their children, did not remove this effect.

3 ↪ Quality of Parent-Child Relationships:

When parents are warm and loving towards children attachments usually develop. Physical punishment is associated with a poorer quality of relationships and attachments. The more children are hit, the less likely they are to feel loved and to love their parents in return. They may fear their parents, feel hostile towards them, and avoid them. Their feelings of security and safety which help them to develop a firm identity and to explore their world are negatively influenced. Gershoff reviewed 13 studies linking the use of physical punishment with the quality of parent-child relationships. The studies showed with 100 percent consistency that physical punishment was associated with poorer child relationships. Most studies are quantitative (i.e. they involve numbers and statistics) but one New Zealand study by Marie Russell²⁷ is qualitative. It gives parents' stories about why they do not physically punish their children, and illustrates how family discipline can affect parent-child relationships. One parent said:

My parents were very strict. I assumed everyone was being brought up the same. You will do as you're told and you won't question. My mother would use the wooden spoon; my father was more into bare hands. There were other things: go to your room, miss out on something.

If you were naughty, they almost took it as a personal affront, they just seemed so offended by it, like you were insulting them. I was basically very good and I was hit frequently. I'm sure through being smacked it made me do so silly things without thinking. It made me go out and do the same thing again, what I'd been smacked for. *The message I got from them when they hit me was not "what you're doing is bad, don't do it again". The message I got was "we don't love you"*²⁸.

4 ↪ **Mental Health Problems:**

Physical punishment has been associated in many studies with the development of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and psychiatric disorders. Gershoff reviewed 12 studies of physical punishment and mental health in childhood, and 8 studies of physical punishment and mental health in adulthood. Again there was 100 percent consistency in the findings of these studies that mental health problems in childhood and adulthood were associated with being physically punished. New Zealand's high levels of suicide²⁹ are already a concern so this is a particularly worrying effect of our acceptance of physical punishment. Mental health problems associated with physical punishment may be due to the suppression of childhood anger associated with being hit by adults on whom children are dependent for love and nurturance³⁰.

5 ↪ **Moral Internalisation:**

The major long-term goal of family discipline is to help children internalise the values and attitudes of society to guide their own behaviour. Most parents want their children to internalise such values, but many do not realise that the excessive use of power assertive discipline, in the absence of explanation, may have the opposite effect from what they wish to achieve. Gershoff's review shows that physical punishment lessens the chances that children will internalise parental rules and values. The development of internal control of children's behaviour is more likely to occur within the context of warm, supportive relationships and interactions, than within a context of power assertive discipline. One study³¹ suggested that even very young children are beginning to internalise their parents' rules. When two and three year-old children were more involved in warm conversations with mothers (as opposed to being reprimanded by them) children were much more likely to do what their mothers told them to do, or **not** do what their mothers told them not to do, even when their mothers were not there.

6 ↪ **Negative Effects Regardless of Ethnicity:**

The evidence overall suggests that the use of physical punishment is associated with the risk of negative long-term outcomes for children regardless of ethnic group³². While there are a few studies showing that moderate smacking had benign effects for African-American children, our overview of the data does not support the suggestion overall that physical punishment has different effects for different ethnic groups. The nature of parent-child relationships, such as the presence or absence of qualities such as parental warmth and involvement, has been found to have a similar influence on developmental outcomes for children across all ethnic groups.

What is Meant by Effective Discipline?

There is no universal recipe for effective parenting. Different methods will work better with different behaviours, different children, in different families, and in different cultural contexts. It is also unrealistic to expect that a single disciplinary act will have an effect immediately.

Discipline is a process which takes time – there are no instant effects, especially with younger children³³. Discipline is part of children's life experiences and its effectiveness is influenced by children's relationships, interactions and experiences within the family, and by the wider context of families. While it is clear from the research that severe and harsh punishment (both physical or other) is potentially very risky for children's development, occasional physical punishment occurs in many families, and may not have long-term negative effects as long as it is used in a climate of warmth and love, where the predominant mode of relating to children is positive. Nevertheless physical punishment should be avoided if possible because of the uncertainty of where the dividing line is between mild and severe.



Six Principles or Characteristics of Effective Discipline

I ~+~ Parental Warmth and Involvement

There is one fairly well established research finding and that is the “universality of rejection as a negative psychological influence in the lives of children.”³⁴ If children experience criticism, lack of acceptance, and feel unloved they are likely to become defiant and aggressive³⁵. If children have warm, trusting, responsive and reciprocal relationships with their caregivers they are likely to develop internal controls on behaviour, and learn what their caregivers want to teach them.

Within the context of a warm relationship and shared feelings, children are much more likely to respond to the demands of their parents to behave in particular ways. “Cooperation and compliance begins in infancy. Compliance flourishes in a climate of attentive, caring and affectionate relationships.”³⁶

The all important process of attachment develops over the first year of life, so warmth and sensitivity to infants is essential. All children are noncompliant at some stage (especially when they are toddlers), when they are very busy exploring the world. Noncompliance is not likely to last if the toddler grows up in the context of loving relationships and there is consistency and firmness.

Provided that warm loving relationships exist between children and their parents, mild punishment is not likely to have harmful effects³⁷. But several authors believe that even low levels of physical punishment are harmful³⁸ even within the context of a warm relationship. The use of physical punishment weakens bonds between mother and child³⁹. A high ratio of positive to negative interactions between parents and children is a characteristic of effective parenting and teaching⁴⁰. Effective discipline involves ratios of around 6 to 8 positive comments to 1 negative comment⁴¹. Examples of positive comments are “good”, “that’s interesting”, “that’s right”, “that was very kind of you”, “I like that”, “good thinking” but positive response can also be conveyed by smiling, touching, hugging or other non-verbal means. Negative comments could include “don’t do that”, “stop”, “No” and non-verbal responses include frowning, or head shaking.



2 ↻ Clear Communication and Expectations

Disciplinary encounters are a form of teaching. Therefore how parents communicate with their children when they discipline them is important. Children learn about the perspectives of others (especially their caregivers), through everyday conversations and interactions with the people who they are close to. If the child does not understand the message from the caregiver, or if it is vague, confusing, or hostile, then she is not likely to understand, retain or internalize the message about the rules of what is, and what is not permissible. What parents say to children when they discipline them will influence how effective discipline is. For example, if parents punish children without explaining clearly what they are being punished for, the child will not receive a clear message, and they are therefore likely to misbehave again.

Parents' expectations should be sensible, and based on what is possible for the child given his or her current level of competence. For example, expecting a one-year-old to eat without making a mess, or a two-year-old child not to have toilet accidents is unreasonable. Parents can support children to help them understand and carry out what they are asking them to do. For example, facial expressions (smiling, eye contact or even frowning), being in close proximity to the child, giving verbal or non verbal encouragement or prompting, can assist children to respond appropriately to disciplinary encounters.

A sequence of statements which capture the child's attention, direct attention to the object or topic under question, and a specific explanation of what is expected and why, are important. Such disciplinary strategies are likely to increase the chances of children regulating their own behaviour in the future. Internalisation is less likely to occur when children do not understand the message or do not agree with it⁴².

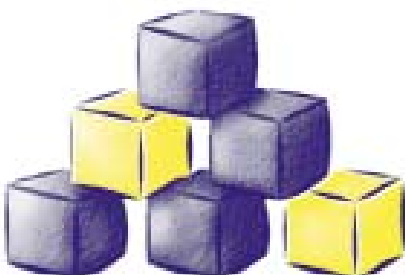
A family climate in which children's perspectives are listened to, respected and considered, and where children feel that they can state their own point of view without anxiety, is likely to be the most favourable for effective communication.

Parents' expectations should be sensible, and based on what is possible for the child given his or her current level of competence. For example, expecting a one-year-old to eat without making a mess, or a two-year-old child not to have toilet accidents is unreasonable.

3 ~ Induction and Explanation

Inductive methods of discipline involving reasoning, explanation, setting up logical consequences and limit setting, are the most effective, and the most likely to lead to internalization. In contrast, power assertive methods which emphasise obedience without giving explanations are generally agreed to be less effective. Of particular importance is the use of *other-oriented induction*⁴³, or reasoning which attempts to sensitise children to the negative effects of their behaviour on others. Intense messages about not hurting, teasing, or ridiculing others, which draw attention to how it feels to be on the receiving end of such behaviour, are important to encourage children's prosocial behaviour. For example, if a three-year-old grabs a toy from another child, he needs to be told that this makes the other child angry and upset, and that he has to wait for his turn to play with the toy.

Straightforward explanations which capture children's attention and make the rules clear increase the chances that children will accurately perceive and internalize a parent's message. Another factor which affects the internalization of messages is whether children agree with and accept the parental message, which is a matter of the degree of overlap or fit between parental and child values. Whether or not children are willing to accept the message being conveyed by parents is influenced by parent-child relationships as well as other relationships in the child's life (with peers). Ongoing loving relationships are more likely to promote acceptance of parental messages than distant or rejecting relationships.



4 **Rules, Boundaries and Demands**

One important component of authoritative parenting is that it is based on clearly communicated and explained rules and limits. In order to internalize rules and limits, children need to know and understand them, and it helps their acceptance if such rules are fair and positive. Children's sense of fairness and justice is enhanced by a well structured, firm, and consistent set of rules of conduct. The emphasis should be placed on what behaviour is acceptable rather than just what behaviour is unacceptable⁴⁴. The age appropriateness of rules and the feasibility of enforcing rules has to be taken into account. Sometimes parents have to be flexible and modify the rules if they do not appear to be working, or if they find that they are expecting too much of children. The task of behaving appropriately is made more difficult for children if there are different rules, demands or boundaries in different parts of their lives. If for example, their parents live apart, children's lives can become fragmented and confused if they are expected to behave differently and allowed to do different things when they are with their mother than when they are with their father.

In high risk families (for example, those in families with very low incomes, or living in dangerous neighbourhoods), if parents report setting firm and consistent limits (without corporal punishment) children are better adjusted⁴⁵. Under conditions of high risk, parental supervision, increased limit setting, and predictable routines are particularly important to achieve positive outcomes for children.

How parents choose reasonable and appropriate goals for children is critical. It is wise for parents to think of children's wishes, happiness and competence, when they select goals. Choosing rules and goals sensibly can help reduce the number of disciplinary conflicts, commands and negative feedback. For example, it is probably more realistic for parents to eliminate aggressive behaviour, than to expect complete obedience all the time.

Scolding or reprimanding can be a form of positive reinforcement where the child gets attention for inappropriate behaviour. Overly critical parenting also has a negative effect on the warmth of the parent-child relationship.

5 **Consistency and Consequences**

Consistency is one important characteristic of effective discipline, which influences learning, along with consequences. A great deal of research⁴⁶ shows that child conduct problems are related to inconsistent discipline. The best way of changing undesirable behaviour is to change the consequences which follow it. Consistent positive consequences like praise, or extra treats should follow positive behaviour, and consistent mild punishments like time-out, or loss of privileges, should follow negative behaviour.

The use of logical consequences like having children clean up their own messes, or natural consequences like children being late for school when they don't get up in time, can be effective and help children to develop responsibility. When every time an action occurs it is followed by a positive consequence, this is called continuous reinforcement. Intermittent reinforcement means that consequences follow only some of the behaviour. If behaviour is inconsistently or intermittently reinforced, it can be harder to eliminate. This can either be helpful or unhelpful, depending on whether parents wish the behaviour to continue or stop. For example, praise for successfully accomplishing a household chore does not have to occur every time (at least once the action is well established) to maintain the good behaviour. However, parents often inadvertently reinforce an undesirable behaviour. If a parent sometimes responds to a child's whining by paying attention for example, and sometimes does not, it becomes even harder to stop the whining.

A frequent form of punishment which may inadvertently encourage undesirable behaviour, is scolding, or reprimanding⁴⁷. There is very little to be said in favour of scolding, despite it being such a frequently used method of punishment. Scolding might be transiently effective, but a high frequency of use reduces its effectiveness. Hostility between parents and children both increases child demands and increases parental giving in⁴⁸. Scolding or reprimanding can be a form of positive reinforcement where the child gets attention for inappropriate behaviour. Overly critical parenting also has a negative effect on the warmth of the parent-child relationship.

It is therefore important for parent educators to help parents to reduce the number of power assertive commands and reprimands they direct at children, and increase positive feedback and inductive control. Limited verbal feedback to children about the unacceptability of their behaviour may be necessary and effective if not over used, but it should be within a predominant context of positive warm nurturing interactions between parent and child.

Time-out can be a useful and effective punishment procedure involving immediate brief isolation following an inappropriate behaviour, which is just as, or more, effective than physical punishment in encouraging compliance⁴⁹.

Time-out is an extreme form of ignoring, during which children are removed for a brief period from all sources of positive reinforcement, especially adult attention⁵⁰.

In order for time-out to be effective, however, 'time in' has to be more interesting and attractive than the isolation area⁵¹. Research suggests that the use of time-out is more supportive of ongoing positive relationships between parents and children than other forms of punishment like scolding or physical punishment. Like all punishment, it should be combined with procedures which provide positive consequences for appropriate behaviour or the absence of inappropriate behaviours.

Time-out gives children a chance to calm down, and removes them from situations and people which might have triggered the behaviour. Children should be warned ahead of time which behaviour will result in time-out, and the parent should keep calm and neutral, rather than lecturing, blaming or arguing before, during and after time-out. Time-out should be brief (3 to 5 minutes for small children)⁵² and children should be expected to be quiet (if they are kicking or yelling for instance), for about 15 seconds before removal from time-out. When time-outs are escalated, used too frequently and for too lengthy periods, without focusing on teaching appropriate behaviour, they share the disadvantages of other kinds of punishment - for example, only temporarily stopping the behaviour and the behaviour re-appearing once the time-out is over. Children have to be actively taught what is expected of them as well as (or instead of) being punished for not meeting expectations.

Another type of mild punishment, which is an alternative to time-out, is overcorrection. There are two types of overcorrection – restitution and positive practice. Restitution involves making up for the bad effects of the inappropriate behaviour, and positive practice involves repetitive practice of behaviours which are incompatible with the misbehaviour. Research⁵³ on overcorrection of sibling behaviour involved restitution (brief apology) and positive practice after aggression towards a sibling. The positive practice required such behaviours as offering a toy, touching the sibling nicely, or saying something positive to the sibling.

Overcorrection was compared with time-out and both procedures were shown to be equally effective in reducing the negative behaviour. Parents, however, preferred overcorrection to time-out as a disciplinary procedure. They especially liked the way in which children learned new more positive behaviour as a result of overcorrection.

Children have to be actively taught what is expected of them as well as (or instead of) being punished for not meeting expectations.



6 ~ Context – Structuring the Situation

Children's behaviour is influenced by the context in which they are embedded. For example, taking children to the supermarket can encourage 'can-I-have' type requests. Having a lot of attractive objects on low shelves tends to encourage toddlers to explore these objects which can result in breakages.

Children have to learn to tell the difference between stimulus situations where it is appropriate to respond in particular ways, and others where it is not.

The following example illustrates the process through which one child was learning to discriminate between appropriate throwing and inappropriate throwing. A 16 month-old girl enjoyed playing with her parents and grandparents throwing pebbles into a lake during her summer holiday. She particularly enjoyed the sight and sound of the splashing when she threw the pebbles. Unfortunately she also liked throwing other small objects inside the house, which hurt people and damaged objects, and she enjoyed throwing sand from the sandpit. Through saying no and taking her out of the situation where she was throwing (for example the sandpit) the adults tried to control her behaviour in order to achieve stimulus control. Distracting her by playing with other attractive toys was also tried.

Modelling is an important aspect of the context for children, which may inadvertently result in inappropriate behaviour. Parents have to be aware that **what they do**, can have just as much influence on children's behaviour, as **what they say**. Seeing someone else smoking, for example, is a stimulus likely to encourage smoking in others. Parents may watch long hours of television, shout at each other, be physically violent - all of these behaviours can be acquired by children through observational learning even though parents do not wish their children to act in the same way. Models can also be highly effective means of teaching positive and prosocial behaviours. There is a great deal of evidence that even from infancy children learn by imitating their siblings⁵⁴.

Knowing how certain contexts are likely to cause unacceptable child behaviour can provide caregivers with some useful ideas for avoiding triggering unacceptable behaviour. For example, preventing inappropriate toddler behaviour in an early childhood centre and at home can be encouraged by child proofing the play space and removing breakable materials; providing several of the same kinds of toys to avoid conflicts; varying the tempo and routines, and using calming rituals (like stories or songs); and refocusing children into interesting, safe and acceptable activities (as opposed to unsafe or inappropriate ones)⁵⁵. All of these examples involve structuring the stimulus situation to reduce the likelihood that inappropriate behaviour will occur, and minimising the need for negative disciplinary action.



Research suggests that it is possible but not necessarily easy to change parental disciplinary practices. Parents already use a variety of different approaches in their discipline. Many are willing to change their disciplinary approach as a result of their own reflection and experience, and public campaigns can change views of appropriate family discipline.

There is no one model which is the best for influencing all parents. Models which are based on the realities of family lives, treat parents as equals and partners, and recognize the strengths and skills that families have, rather than trying to fix up what is wrong with them, are more likely to be more effective. Programmes which are based on a 'top-down' expert-to-parent approach, which are targeted at 'problem' families, or which ignore the cultural values and beliefs of families, are least likely to be effective. Methods which have been used to encourage change in parental disciplinary practices include:

- changes to law and regulation
- public campaigns and information provided by government and non-government agencies
- provision of one-to-one information and advice from professionals such as doctors, health nurses, early childhood teachers, midwives, social workers, and psychologists, in the process of their normal interactions with families
- dedicated parent education programmes and courses targeted at all families
- targeted parent education programmes for families at risk such as Parents as First Teachers or the Home Instruction Preschool Programme for Youngsters (HIPPPY)
- broad community intervention such as postnatal health checks, availability of high quality child care, or employment assistance, can reduce risk factors for families.

Can Parents Change?

There is no one model which is the best for influencing all parents. Models which are based on the realities of family lives, treat parents as equals and partners, and recognize the strengths and skills that families have, rather than trying to fix up what is wrong with them, are more likely to be more effective.

What do Children Think About Physical Punishment?

Children can, however, suggest various alternatives to smacking (particularly preferring reasoning and explanation) and most say they do not plan to use physical discipline with their own children when they become parents in the future.

Children, from preschoolers to adolescents, are able to discriminate between different forms of misbehaviour (moral, social) and to evaluate which ones they consider to be more severe than others.

Generally, moral transgressions (stealing or hurting another person) are regarded as more serious than social transgressions (staying up past bedtime), especially among young children. Young children are also the group most likely to have a broad acceptance of physical punishment, although studies asking children for their views on smacking show that children of all ages think smacking hurts and is wrong. Children are more likely to perceive that boys will encounter stricter discipline methods in their upbringing, and that fathers are more likely to use more severe discipline methods than mothers.

Recent qualitative studies in the UK⁵⁶ and New Zealand⁵⁷ exploring children's own experiences of and perspectives on family discipline are challenging a number of commonly held adult attitudes and views about physical discipline. The children say that:

- smacking is hitting
- they feel hurt when they are smacked, both physically and mentally
- some are hit on their heads
- only a minority are smacked when they are facing immediate or potential danger
- smacking interrupts children's behaviour, but has many other negative associated effects – children say they did not like their parents any more, they felt angry, upset, grumpy, unloved and sad after being smacked, and for many smacking made them be more naughty.

While children dislike being smacked, many seem to accept it as a parental right or a fact of life. Children can, however, suggest various alternatives to smacking (particularly preferring reasoning and explanation) and most say they do not plan to use physical discipline with their own children when they become parents in the future. Children are also well aware of the conflict caused by the double message being promoted when adults tell children that hitting is bad, yet sometimes use smacking to discipline them.



The following are quotations from two studies which show the perspectives of some children in Scotland and New Zealand.

It doesn't sort anything!

(Girl aged 9)

A big person should not hit a small person.

(Girl aged 9)

Adults would not like being hit so why do they do it to children.

(Boy aged 10)

I think smacking is bad because it hurts people.

(Boy aged 6)

There is another way of sorting it out ... talking, chatting or grounding the child.

(Girl aged 6)

You feel sore and hurt inside.

(Girl aged 9)⁵⁸

It hurts and it makes you cry.

(aged 5)

It's sore and stingy.

(aged 5)

It's not nice to hurt little children.

(aged 5)⁵⁹

Conclusions

If children are to become responsible and effective members of society, then disciplinary methods which encourage them to be sensitive to others and to want to please their parents, are most likely to be effective.

We have concluded from reviewing the research literature that physical punishment should be avoided as a tool in the family discipline kit, because of the risk associated with its use, and because it has not been proved to be effective in producing compliance. While the negative effects are definitely most pronounced when the physical punishment is severe and when it is frequent, there is absolutely no agreement on where to draw the dividing line between moderate and severe physical punishment. In our view, therefore, it is much safer to use other methods of discipline. Physical punishment is a health risk for children, but the good news is that there are other methods of control, already practiced by most parents, which work and do not have harmful long-term effects.

If children are to become responsible and effective members of society, then disciplinary methods which encourage them to be sensitive to others and to want to please their parents, are most likely to be effective. Providing a loving and safe family environment, giving children clear messages about what is expected of them, and providing consistent rewards for good behaviour and mild punishment for bad behaviour, are the obvious way to go. While punishment (but ideally not physical punishment) will continue to have a place within families, it is preferable that children experience mostly positive interactions, which should greatly outnumber negative interactions.

Another factor which influences our perspective on appropriate discipline is how children are viewed. Society has moved away from regarding children as their parents' possession to do what they like with. But there is still a tendency to think that parents' rights are more important than children's rights, that children lack the ability to participate as partners in family endeavours, and that children are in the process of becoming human beings, rather than human beings now. There is still a long way to go before accepting and respecting children as persons in the present.

Ben Phillips and Priscilla Alderson have argued that while public support for smacking and views of it as effective and as a parental duty may be the most obvious obstacle to children's protection from parental violence, the most difficult factors undermining this goal are how cultures think about children. They conclude that:

Family life is full of complicated paradoxes – power and intimacy, love and violence, public and private concerns. There are, inevitably, both harms and benefits in families trying either to remain static or to change. The effective protection of children, however, like that of women, requires not only legal prohibition of violence against them, but a challenging of prejudice about them and a strengthening of their power position. Adult power and convenience need to be disentangled from assumptions about children's best interests. Adult might is neither right nor a 'right'. The protection of children involves challenging the coercive power of parents and recognising the moral and practical value of children's own reasoned resistance to parental violence and coercion.⁶⁰



Footnotes

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