

# SPANKING: DISCIPLINE OR ABUSE?

BY PEARL RIMER

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Although Section 43 of the *Criminal Code of Canada* does not prohibit the physical punishment of children to correct their behaviour, there are parameters around what the Supreme Court of Canada considers “reasonable under the circumstances” (e.g., punishment cannot leave a mark, an object cannot be used, an infant or teenager should never be hit). Despite this, research in Canada and around the world clearly identifies that physical punishment is physically and emotionally harmful to children. For this reason, every effort should be made to help parents and caregivers understand why children need to be protected from physical punishment and to offer positive alternatives for guiding behaviour.

Canadian research tells us that approximately 75% of physical abuse investigations are related to a child being punished inappropriately. Often in these cases, the punishment, which was not intended to injure the child, has gone too far. Although cultural factors may play a role in how children are disciplined, injuring a child is unacceptable. Physical punishment clearly exposes children to risks, and doesn't it make sense to reduce risks whenever possible?

## WHAT IS DISCIPLINE? WHAT IS PUNISHMENT?

*Discipline* is training and guidance that helps a child develop judgment, self-control, boundaries, self-sufficiency, socialized conduct and protects children from danger. *Physical punishment*, on the other hand, aims to inflict pain to correct a child's behaviour.

Discipline is sometimes confused with punishment, particularly by parents and caregivers who use physical punishment in their attempts to correct and change children's behaviour. If physical punishment is not recognized as harmful to children, then parents and caregivers are not receiving the support they need to raise children without the threat of physical force.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT ON CHILDREN?

Physical punishment models negative and ineffective methods of solving conflicts and problems. When children learn to behave this way they, in turn, behave this way toward other children in school/child care settings. Children and youth also receive mixed messages when physical punishment is used. Many schools/child care centres have implemented anti-bullying policies but, at the same time, many children are learning from parents and caregivers that hitting is a way to try and get people to do what you want. Children who model this behaviour and hit others at school/child care then get into trouble. World-wide

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research shows that physical punishment does not have positive outcomes and is not effective in encouraging a lasting change in child behaviour. In fact, the evidence shows that corporal punishment poses a significant risk for immediate and long-term harm to children, including trauma; defiance; increased aggression toward siblings, peers and parents; behavioural problems; developmental delays; depression; anxiety; low self-esteem; substance abuse; delinquency; abuse of one's own children; and spousal assault. The outcomes grow worse with increased intensity or frequency of punishment.

Hitting at the time may seem easier, but does not get at the underlying issue. Therefore, it is likely that hitting will continue to be used by adults, and will often escalate in an effort to try and change a child's behaviour. Most children respond to consistent and fair discipline. If a child does not, then it may be time to ask for help. There are many sources of parenting information in communities, including public health and family physicians.

Despite the vast knowledge of the potential negative impact of spanking on children, why do so many people continue to defend it? The following quote from Kazdin may be helpful in the course of the discussion:

... But parents keep on hitting. Why? The key is corporal punishment's temporary effectiveness in stopping a behaviour. It does work-for a moment, anyway. The direct experience of that momentary pause in misbehaviour has a powerful effect, conditioning the parent to hit again next time to achieve that jolt of fleeting success and blinding the parent to the long-term failure of hitting to improve behaviour. The research consistently shows that unwanted behaviour will return at the same rate as before. But parents believe that corporal punishment works, and they are further encouraged in that belief by feeling that they have a right and even a duty to punish as harshly as necessary (2008, p. 1).

## AVOIDING PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT CAN IMPROVE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

The use of physical punishment can negatively affect the longer term goal of developing and maintaining a parent-child relationship with open communication and trust, both of which are important to keep kids safe. Children and youth are unlikely to confide in anyone whom they think will hurt them. It is often said by parents that their children respect them because of the physical punishment received; however, the reality is that it is more likely that their children fear them. If our children and youth are secure in knowing that they will not be physically or emotionally hurt by their parents/caregivers for their behaviour, then chances are they will be more open with us about what is going on in their lives. No matter what, a caregiver can always find a solution to a problem with a child/youth that does not involve physical punishment.

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