

Responding to frequently asked questions about corporal punishment of children

What is the difference between corporal punishment and physical punishment?

Corporal and physical punishment mean the same thing. Terms such as "smacking" or "spanking" are often used to make corporal punishment seem more socially acceptable.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the following definition of corporal punishment:

"The Committee defines "corporal" or "physical punishment" as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children, with the hand or with an implement - a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children's mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child."

General Comment No 8, 2006. On "The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (arts. 19;28, para.2;and37, inter alia)", para.11, [www.2.ochr.org/english/bodies/crc/comments.htm](http://www2.ochr.org/english/bodies/crc/comments.htm)

My religion requires me to use corporal punishment

Hitting children is not compatible with the ideals, values and beliefs of the major world religions, which profess compassion, equality, justice and non-violence. Adherents of the world religions model their lives on the example and teachings of their founders. Scholars and theologians emphasise that there is no recorded account of the founder of a major world religion striking a child.

Religious leaders are part of the global movement to eliminate corporal punishment of children. More than 800 religious leaders at the World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Kyoto, Japan (2006) endorsed a declaration - *A Multi-religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children (Kyoto Declaration)* - which urges governments to adopt laws to prohibit all violence against children including corporal punishment.

Click here for a copy of [A Multi-religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children \(Kyoto Declaration\)](#)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 8, asserts that religious freedom "may be legitimately limited in order to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of others".

The Bible instructs parents to use corporal punishment

Some Christians who still advocate corporal punishment refer to this as "Biblical discipline". This term implies that hitting children is the way Jesus would want us to treat children, but there is no evidence that Jesus instructed parents to physically punish their children. All the recorded encounters between Jesus and children were kind, gentle and respectful. Positive non-violent discipline best models Jesus' teaching.

The Bible's Old Testament Book of Proverbs is often quoted as authorising corporal punishment but its ethos and teachings derive from ancient times and not from the new commandment of Jesus which established a new relationship between God and humanity based on love instead of fear. Christians believe in a loving, compassionate, inclusive and forgiving God - not a God of wrath and punishment. We believe the Bible should always be read and interpreted in the light of Jesus' teachings and example.

For further information see pp 29-31 [Ending corporal punishment of children - A handbook for working with and within religious communities](#)

Corporal punishment teaches children right from wrong

Young children learn most of their behaviour from the adults around them. Children who are physically punished learn at an early age that hitting is an acceptable way to resolve conflict and they are therefore more likely to hit other children. The more a child is hit, the more likely it is that the child may grow up to be an adult who deals with others, not with reason, respect and good example, but with force.

All children are entitled to positive non-violent relationships with adults who care for them. And all children are entitled to learn to solve problems and conflict non-violently. By using corporal punishment adults miss the opportunity of teaching children by their own example to respect the human dignity of others and solve problems without force.

Research reveals that corporal punishment hinders rather than helps learning. It can create fear in a child who learns that a loved and trusted adult is prepared to inflict pain to force unquestioning obedience. Young children may be left with feelings they cannot yet resolve, such as fear, shame, rage, revenge and hostility.

It is vitally important that all parents are aware that corporal punishment places children at risk of physical injury and may interfere with psychological adjustment, socialisation, moral

internalisation, brain development and positive adult-child relationships. Its use is a violation of a child's right to physical integrity and dignity. Corporal punishment hinders child protection. There is a danger that hitting children teaches them to accept the idea that older people have authority over their bodies, including the right to inflict pain. It is difficult for children who are physically punished to regard their bodies with respect and as their personal property.

Corporal punishment is necessary to warn a child of danger

Some parents who are anxious to justify physical punishment argue that a parent has a duty to smack a young child who is about to touch a hot stove or run out into a busy road, as a warning not to do it again. But it is the responsibility of the parent to protect a child from the dangers of hot stoves and busy roads until the time when she or he learns from adult guidance and example how to deal with these hazards safely. Physically restraining a child to prevent harm is not punishment.

Without physical discipline children will become out of control

Defenders of physical punishment often argue that the only choice is between physical punishment and doing nothing. But positive non-violent discipline recognises the importance for children of having safe limits appropriate to a child's age and development which do not involve physical punishment. The term "discipline" is too often misunderstood to mean "punishment" but it literally means "to learn". Discipline can also be understood as discipleship with adults serving as positive role models for children, not as people who inflict emotional or physical pain as punishment.

Punishment means to "cause to undergo pain". The philosophy that supports punishment regards blind obedience as a virtue.

Physical punishment is ineffective because it does not tell children what they have done wrong or what to do instead. Children are usually too overwhelmed with hurt and anger to listen to explanations. It may stop a certain type of behaviour for the moment, but this may only last for a short time and may actually increase the child's undesirable behaviour in the future because physical punishment simply teaches children to use force to get what they want. It can reinforce a child's sense of failure, resentment, rebellion and resistance.

There is no place for punishment in positive non-violent discipline. Positive non-violent discipline is based on an understanding of the needs and rights of the growing child and works through enhancing the relationship between parents/adults and children. It is always respectful, acknowledges and delights in a child's development and achievements, focuses on acceptable behaviour and gives encouragement.

Children depend on adults to teach positive, non-violent behaviour by example. Adults who use positive, non-violent discipline help children develop the life-long skill of self-discipline. Positive non-violent discipline takes thought and care and patience - but it works -

and it strengthens the bond between child and adult. It establishes a safe environment with boundaries appropriate to the child's age and development. Because it encourages cooperation between children and the adults who care for and work with them, it helps reduce stress.

Positive non-violent discipline respects the human dignity and physical, emotional and spiritual integrity of the child. It:

- gives guidance to a child without the use of violence;
- builds loving, trusting and empathic relationships;
- fosters an understanding of the physical and emotional needs of the developing child;
- promotes and encourages the child's participation and self-evaluation and respects the child's view;
- listens to a child's point of view and encourages the child to problem-solve; and
- models and teaches skills for resolving conflict without the use of violence.

[Click here](#) for further information and resources on positive, non-violent discipline

I was hit as a child and it never did me any harm

People usually hit children because they were themselves hit as children and corporal punishment was part of the tradition and culture in which they grew up. Some adults have tried to disguise the painful memory of being hit as a child by trivialising and making fun of the experience. They don't want to think badly of their parents so they insist it did them no harm. But times have changed and we must move on.

Today we regard children with respect for their human dignity. We are aware of the dangers and ineffectiveness of physical punishment and we are aware of children's developmental needs. A full-sized adult who hits a smaller child can cause harm in the short and long-term both physically and emotionally.

Corporal punishment in childhood has been linked to many adult problems such as depression, low self-esteem, psychiatric problems and addictions.

It has also been linked to sexual problems in adulthood. The buttocks are an erogenous zone connected to the body's sexual nerve centres. Children who are hit on the buttocks may experience the confusion of an association between sexual pleasure and pain. This can have a lasting effect and may influence relationships and the way in which sexuality is expressed in adulthood.

There is a difference between a loving smack and child abuse

The notion of a "loving smack" is perverse. We cannot equate the pain of hitting a vulnerable child, with love. Some people advocate using a "loving smack" accompanied by an explanation about the child's behaviour. But this sends a confusing message to children

and equates love with pain. It interferes with the trust and respect between children and the adults who are meant to protect them.

Because smacking children is ineffective, "little smacks" often escalate and get out of control. Parents convicted of seriously assaulting their children often explain that the ill-treatment began as "ordinary" punishment.

As compassionate, just communities we must be clear and say that all hitting of children is wrong, however "light".

Decisions about using corporal punishment should be left to parents

Hitting children is wrong, just as it is unacceptable for adult family members to hit each other. Children are not their parents' possessions. As rights holders, children are entitled to physical and emotional integrity and respect for their human dignity. Human rights do not stop at the family door. Children are individuals who are entitled to the enjoyment of their human rights like everyone else.

"All children are entitled to positive, non-violent relationships with the adults who care for them...Adults are the protectors, guides and supporters of children and as such responsible for their quality of life."

Charter for Religious Communities

Why is it necessary to change the law?

It is difficult to believe that in modern times we still have laws that sanction violence against children and that some people, including some religious communities, plead the right to retain corporal punishment. But physically punishing children is incompatible with universal religious values of respect for human dignity, compassion, justice, equality and non-violence. However, some people use their religion and sacred texts to attempt to justify their actions.

All children have a right to the same legal protection from assault as adults. Law reform is part of an educational process. Efforts to change attitudes will be ineffective while the law provides a defence for adults who hit children. Without law reform all the work of those who promote non-violent discipline is undermined.

Law reform will mean prosecution more parents

Law reform is about setting standards for the care and protection of children. The purpose of prohibiting all corporal punishment of children is not to increase prosecutions of parents. As in the case of assaults against adults, perpetrators are generally not prosecuted for "minor" assaults and this would usually also apply where parents mildly assault (physically punish) children. For these parents a supportive response based on the acknowledgement

that most parents want to do the best for their child, should be developed. Parents are more likely to seek help earlier when they recognise that hitting children is socially and legally unacceptable. as the Committee on the Rights of the Child states:

"The principle of equal protection of children and adults from assault, including within the family, does not mean that all cases of corporal punishment of children by their parents that come to light should lead to prosecution of parents. The de minimis principle - that the law does not concern itself with trivial matters - ensures that minor assaults between adults only come to court in very exceptional circumstances; the same will be true of minor assaults on children. States need to develop effective reporting and referral mechanisms. While all reports of violence against children should be appropriately investigated and their protection from significant harm assured, the aim should be to stop parents from using violent or other cruel or degrading punishments through supportive and educational, not punitive, interventions."

(Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), General Comment No. 8 on "The Right of the Child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel and degrading forms of punishment", para. 40,

I have smacked my children in the past so wouldn't it be hypocritical of me to support the campaign to ban smacking?

Many people who support the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment, including religious leaders, "smacked" their children or were themselves physically punished as children, but they recognise that everyone has the right to change their views and move on. It is good to want a better future for all our children, whatever happened in the past.

For detailed up-to-date information about countries where corporal punishment has been banned visit the website of the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children:

<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org>

Further information and resources from www.churchesfornon-violence.org