

# Positive Discipline

## ***Introduction***

While they may be separated by geography, religious beliefs and traditions, parents in all cultures have much in common. They share, among other things, the universal desire to keep their children safe and to help them grow to become healthy, contributing members of society.

In Ontario, those aspirations for our children have been enshrined in the Child and Family Services Act, which seeks to promote the best interests of children and mandates their protection. With the guidance of this Act, Peel Children's Aid also advocates for the children in the Peel community and has sought answers to questions about how the goals of safety and discipline for children can be achieved.

One important question many parents ask is whether physical punishment of children – sometimes called corporal punishment – is an effective or desirable strategy to guide children to responsible adulthood.

Based on community consultations, and the evidence of experts and researchers in the field, Peel Children's Aid does not recommend or support physical punishment of children as a discipline technique. We feel it contributes to an acceptance of violence in our society and is a risk factor for a number of long-term problems in children.

## ***The history of physical punishment***

The use of physical punishment as a tool to discipline children and control their behaviour has a long history in our culture. Some proponents seek to justify its use today on this basis alone. However, using physical punishment on children has, throughout most of our history, been matched by a similar acceptance of the use of physical punishment on wives, servants and slaves. Laws permitting these forms of punishment have been rescinded, and only children may still be disciplined in these ways.

Others support the use of physical punishments such as spanking on religious grounds. Their interpretation of certain scriptures, particularly those in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, suggests to them that these punishments are a religious requirement, commanded by God. Other religious leaders interpret the same Bible verses differently and may point to other verses urging gentle treatment of children.

## ***Research***

Recent years have seen a shift among Canadian parents in general towards less frequent use of physical discipline. This has been in part the result of research revealing that spankings and similar actions can be risk factors for longer-term problems.

For example, the U.S. Children, Youth and Families Education Research Network found that 70 per cent of cases where children were abused began with a spanking. A 1995 study at Hamilton's McMaster University found that adults who had been spanked as children were more likely to experience depression, addiction and other mental health problems as adults. Those who had been abused as children were not included in the statistical analysis.

Research by a number of people (including Straus, 1997 and Baumrind & Owens, 2001) suggests that children who are spanked are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers. Other studies (University of New Hampshire, 1991) found that spanked children were more likely to hit others, defy parents, ignore rules and be uncooperative when observed four years later, and Durrant (1994) found physical punishment correlated with delinquency, violence and crime in later life.

Power and Chapieski found in 1986 that toddlers who were spanked made smaller gains in developmental skills over the next seven months than those who were not. Recent research (1998) by Straus found that spanked children achieve lower scores, on average, on IQ tests. His theory is that parents who decide not to spank spend more time talking to their children and discussing appropriate behaviour, and this factor leads to higher IQ scores. It is also possible, though, that the stress hormones produced when children are frightened or hurt because of a spanking, diminish learning.

Some studies found that when other parenting skills are high, the negative effects of spanking are diminished. However, no studies have found overall benefits to spanking when compared to approaches to parenting that do not involve physical punishments. In addition, children may learn unintended messages when spanking and similar punishments are used. Children may come to believe that it is okay to hit people you love and that force is an acceptable way to achieve your goal. They may focus more on avoiding punishments – for example, by not being caught – than on the real reasons that the behaviour is not desirable. This makes it harder for them to learn self-control.

### **Legal issues**

Sweden was the first country to outlaw the physical punishment of children in 1979. The law was accompanied by a vigorous education campaign to help parents understand the harmful effects of spanking and to teach them new ways of parenting. Since then, ten other countries have also passed laws to make spanking illegal. None of these countries prescribe criminal penalties for spanking or other punishments.

In 2000, an appeal was made to the Supreme Court of Canada to repeal Section 43 of the Criminal Code, which permits parents to use “reasonable force” to discipline their children. This section currently reads: *Every school teacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent, is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances.*

This has been used successfully to defend parents who have hit children with straps, belts and sticks causing bruises, welts and other injuries. This Section, like all sections of the Criminal Code, is aimed at providing for prosecution of crimes that have occurred. It does not deal with risk or what may be in the best interests of the child. Rather than focusing on prosecution, The Child and Family Services Act seeks to protect children including those who are at risk of harm or injury.

During this challenge to Section 43, Justice McCombs noted that the expert evidence of both sides – those who supported corporal punishment of children and those who were opposed – agreed on several points:

- Corporal punishment of children under two is wrong and harmful.
- Corporal punishment of teenagers is not helpful and potentially harmful.
- Using objects such as belts, rulers, etc. is potentially dangerous and should not be tolerated.
- A slap or blow to the head is dangerous and should never happen.
- There is no evidence of any benefit to spanking over other methods of discipline.
- None of the experts recommend or advocate spanking over other approaches to discipline.
- “Time out” is universally endorsed as an effective alternative.
- Spanking – defined as the administration of one or two mild to moderate smacks with an open hand on the buttocks or extremities which does not cause physical harm – is not child abuse.

Peel Children’s Aid does not have any mandate or legal responsibility to intervene with a family where children were occasionally punished by spanking as described above. In light of the responsibilities of Peel Children’s Aid, it is our role to intervene in discipline situations where excessive force is used, children are hit with objects or children suffer injuries, for example.

We encourage families to learn alternative approaches to discipline which do not involve spanking, since there is a considerable body of evidence about the risks of this kind of punishment. The majority of parents recognize this. In a 1996 study (Graziano, Hamblen, Platte), 85 per cent of the parents who spanked their children said they would rather not if they had a good alternative. Discipline is not synonymous with punishment.

### ***Children’s Aid Society (CAS) intervention***

Discipline is derived from the word disciple which means one who follows or learns from, and it includes all the things parents do to teach or guide their children. A parent who provides a good example is disciplining his or her children, as is the parent who offers the child choices or allows him or her to experience the consequences of his or her behaviour.

One way to look at punishment is as a continuum. At one end would be parents who do not use punishment at all in raising their children; at the other would be parents who physically abuse their children and cause serious injuries in the name of discipline.

Situations that would not warrant investigation by a children’s aid society:

1. No discipline
2. Discipline such as withdrawal of privileges, time out, grounding, and others which do not involve hurting the child
3. Physical discipline that is not excessive such as one or two spansks with an open hand on the child’s clothed bottom used infrequently. The purpose of discipline is to symbolize disapproval, not to hurt, inflict pain or leave injuries on the child.

Situations that warrant intervention by a children’s aid society:

1. Excessive or inappropriate discipline
2. Inappropriate discipline resulting in injuries

An example of physical discipline that is not excessive might be a situation where a young child is about to run across a busy street and the parent pulls the child back and spanks him on his clothed rear. This is a common reaction for many parents, and intervention by the CAS would not be appropriate. However, parents may be interested to know that research has found that toddlers and preschoolers who are spanked for running into the road are MORE likely to run into the road again, when compared with young children who were taken to a safer place to play and taught about playing safely (McCord, 1996; Embry, 1977).



When parents move beyond the level of occasional and mild use of physical discipline, there is heightened cause for concern. The frequent use of such disciplinary methods (e.g., spanking, hand slapping, jerking by the arm etc.) may not cause physical injury but is seen by child welfare professionals as inappropriate.

Research (Straus, 1996; McCord, 1996) found that the more frequently children are spanked, the more likely they are to be angry as adults, to hit their spouses and to have conflict in their relationships. Parents who spank frequently are more likely to escalate to more harmful forms of corporal punishment (such as using a belt or other object) and to make verbally abusive comments (McCord, 1996).

McCord also found that parents who spank frequently tend to increase the intensity of the punishment when the child's behaviour does not improve, rather than changing strategies. Another study (Wilson, Lyman 1982) found that when parents also spanked, other strategies such as time-out, positive reinforcement or removal of privileges were less effective.

We believe that all professionals who work with children and families have a responsibility to discuss discipline with parents who are using physical punishments in an attempt to help them make use of services which could assist them in learning more effective methods of child discipline. We do not consider the community problem of inappropriate child rearing practices to be the exclusive responsibility of a children's aid society.

To determine when physical discipline is highly inappropriate, a social worker considers several components of the situation. There are reasonable grounds for suspecting that a child may be in need of protection when parents use highly inappropriate physical discipline, and a plan of intervention needs to be developed.

The factors considered in assessing this include:

i) METHOD

No parent or caregiver should use a weapon on any part of a child's body. Belts, sticks, electrical cords, hairbrushes, wooden spoons or other utensils are examples of "weapons." The risk of causing a serious injury increases significantly when these items are used, because it is harder for the parents to know how hard the child is being hit. Similarly, the punching, kicking or repeated hard slapping of a child or the shaking of an infant by an adult are causes for serious concern.

ii) SEVERITY

The amount of force used by the caregiver and the part of the child's body that is struck determine the severity. Physical discipline may be considered severe and highly inappropriate in some situations even when minimal force is applied. For example, hitting or slapping a child about the head, face or neck area is considered a severe action and of great concern, regardless of the force applied, because of the potential for physical harm. In addition, if the child receives a visible or internal mark or injury, no matter how superficial, the situation should be reported.

iii) FREQUENCY

A pattern of frequent, ongoing use of physical discipline increases the concern for a child's well-being, because of the increased potential for injury and long-term psychological problems for the child.

iv) AGE

The potential for injury from physical discipline to young children is particularly high. Infants, toddlers, or pre-schoolers are especially vulnerable. Medical evidence is clear, for example, that serious internal injury, even death, can result from shaking, dragging or throwing an infant.



#### v) CONTEXT

If other risk factors or indicators of abuse are present, then the risk of injury from physical punishment is higher, and the situation is more serious.

#### ***Physical punishment and children in care***

When children come into foster care or reside in a group home, the children's aid society takes on the role of the parents. We are responsible for seeing that the children in our care are taught appropriate behaviour, but we take a consistent stand when it comes to physical punishment: foster parents and group home staff are not permitted to use spankings or other corporal punishments with the children in their care.

#### ***Learning to parent without physical punishment***

When parents have been using physical punishments to manage their children, it can be challenging for them to learn new approaches. Peel Children's Aid workers can counsel families about their concerns, may refer to programs in the community or connected with the agency, or may offer techniques and ideas.

Research (Dix 1991) stresses the importance of a warm and affectionate relationship between parents and children as the basis for all discipline. Identifying and supporting positive behaviours is also important, including parental modelling of appropriate behaviour (Kohlberg, 1964).

Strategies to deal with inappropriate behaviour have also been assessed through research. Those most often shown to be effective include:

- A time-out, where the child is removed from the room and therefore deprived of attention and interaction with parents and others for an age appropriate length of time, is one much-studied technique. In some cases, the child may be placed in a chair or other defined location. Studies found this significantly improved compliance with parents' expectations. (Scarboro, Forehand 1975).
- Time-out is less effective if the parents verbally reprimand the child at the same time (Roberts, Powers 1990).
- Time-out may not change behaviour immediately but it is considered highly effective as a long-term strategy (Wilson, Lyman 1982).
- For older children, withdrawing privileges or restricting participation in desired activities has been shown to be effective in changing behaviour. Some examples might be: no TV or computer games for an evening, not being able to go play with friends for a period of time, etc. (Davies, McMahon, Flessati, Tiedemann, 1984).
- Providing a logical consequence – something linked to the misbehaviour – is also effective. For example, a child who rides his bike without wearing his helmet might have his bike put away for the rest of the day. A child who colours on the wall might have his crayons put away and might also have to help clean up (Parke, 1969).
- Explaining why the child's behaviour is not acceptable and what behaviours would be appropriate helps the child understand and improves overall compliance (Parke, 1969).

Some additional tips from parent educators to help parents discipline without corporal punishment:

- Many parents have unrealistic expectations of their young children. They may expect a preschooler to be able to clean up his room, for example, without help. They may also become angry or irritated when a child forgets a rule or instruction he has been given. Learning about child development and understanding that children need repetition in order to learn may be helpful.



- Parents can create an environment at home that makes good behaviour easier for the child. Putting breakable items out of a toddler's reach is a simple step that can help. Helping children to get enough sleep and to eat when they are hungry will reduce temper tantrums and uncooperative behaviour. If a child has trouble getting ready for school in the morning, perhaps setting everything out the night before will eliminate morning battles.
- "Do" usually works better than "don't." It's more effective – especially with young children – to tell them "you can run outside" than to just say "don't run in the living room." Parents can show a child how to pat the puppy gently, rather than saying "don't be so rough."
- Parents can give children choices whenever possible.
- With toddlers and young children, parents may need to clarify their message by intervening physically. For example, if a child starts to run into the road, the parent may need to pick her up and carry her into the house or the backyard where she can play safely. If one child hits another, the parent may need to step in between them and pick up the one who has been hurt.
- When possible, parents can allow children to experience natural consequences. If a child comes home late for dinner, he may have to reheat his dinner or eat it cold. If a preschooler refuses to put on his mittens, his hands will be cold when he goes outside and he'll have to come back in to get his mittens.
- Parents can ask the child to do a "make-up" or to solve the problem caused by their behaviour. Colouring on the wall might mean the child needs to help clean up the "artwork." Hitting another child and making him cry might mean bringing a toy to share with that child so he will feel better.
- It's also important for parents to be aware of their own feelings. Parents who are feeling stressed about other issues are more likely to get angry at their children and hit or spank them.

### **Conclusion**

Because children are vulnerable, our society makes special efforts to protect them from harm. While parents may use physical punishments with the intention of teaching and guiding children, the risk of harm – emotional, developmental and physical – is significant, and there are safer alternative approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective. Peel Children's Aid takes a clear position on this issue.

We do not endorse or support the physical punishment of children, and we encourage parents to investigate the alternate approaches to guide their children to responsible adulthood.

### **Bibliography**

Baumrind D *Minneapolis Symposium Child Psychol* 1973; 3-46 The development of instrumental competence through socialization.

Davies GR, McMahon RJ, Flessati EW, Tiedemann GL *Child Dev* 1984; 55: 111290-11298 Verbal rationales and modeling as adjuncts to a parenting technique for child compliance.

Dix T *Psychol Bulletin* 1991; 110: 3-35 The affective organization of parenting: adaptive and maladaptive processes.

Durrant JE, Rose-Krasnor L *Spanking: Should I or Shouldn't I?* Booklet published by University of Manitoba 1994

Durrant JE *Child Abuse Negl* 1999; 23:435-48 Evaluating the success of Sweden's corporal punishment ban.

Embry D, Malfetti J *Reducing the risk of pedestrian accidents to preschoolers Part of Safe Playing – Final Report* published by Columbia University 1982



- Friedman SB, Schonberg SK Pediatrics 1996; 98:803-860 The short and long-term consequences of physical punishment.
- Graziano AM, Hamblen JL, Platte WA Pediatrics 1996; 98:845-848 Subabusive violence in child-rearing in middle-class American families
- Kohlberg L Review of Child Development Research, Russell-Sage Foundation 1964: 383-431 Development of moral character and moral ideology.
- MacMillan HL, Boyle MH, Wong MY, Duku EK, Fleming IE, Walsh CA CMAJ 1999 Oct 5; 161(7): 805-9 Slapping and spanking in childhood and its association with lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorders in a general population sample.
- McCord J, J Personality and Social Psychology 1979; 37(9): 1477-1486 Some child-rearing antecedents of criminal behavior in adult men.
- McCord J, Pediatrics 1996; 98: 832-834 Unintended consequences of punishment.
- Parke RD, Child Dev 1969; 40: 213-235 Effectiveness of punishment as an interaction of intensity, timing, nurturance and cognitive structure.
- Power T, Chapieski K, Dev Psychol 1986; 22: 271-275 Childrearing and impulse control in toddlers.
- Renard M, Tridon P, Kuhnast M, Renauld JM, Dolfus P Paraplegia 1978 May; 16(1): 130-4 Three unusual cases of spinal cord injury in children.
- Roberts MW, Powers SW, Behav Ther 1990; 21: 257-271 Adjusting time-out enforcement procedures for oppositional children.
- Scarboro ME, Forehand R, J Exp Child Psychol 1975; 19:252-264 Effects of two types of response-contingent time-out on compliance and oppositional behavior of children.
- Stormshak EA, Bierman KL, McMahon RJ, Lengua LJ J Clin Child Psychol 2000 Mar; 29(1): 17-29 Parenting practices and child disruptive behavior problems in early elementary school.
- Straus MA, Mouradian VE Behav Sci Law 1998 Summer; 16(3): 353-74 Corporal punishment by mothers and antisocial behavior and impulsiveness of children.
- Straus MA, World Congress of Sociology, August 1st, 1998 Corporal punishment and IQ
- Straus MA, Sugarman DB, Giles-Sims J Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med 1997 Aug; 151(8): 761-7 Spanking by parents and subsequent antisocial behavior of children
- Webster-Stratton C, Kolpacoff M, Hollinsworth T  
J Consult Clin Psychol 1989; 57: 550-553 The long term effectiveness and clinical significance of three training programs for families with conduct problem children.
- Wilson DR, Lyman RD  
Child Family Behav Ther 1982;4: 5-20 Time-out in the treatment of childhood behavior problems.

Revised – October 2007