



Should Australia ban smacking?

It could, but that would not stop child abuse or improve children's mental health.

Carolyn Moynihan | 10 September 2013



Of all the things that might improve the lot of children today – and being brought into the world by a married mum and dad is high on the list – outlawing the parental smack has proved popular with governments. Passing a law against something that is already on the decline is so much easier than turning back the tide of sexual liberalism that creates so many fragile families and abused children.

Spurred on by human rights groups, 33 countries have banned all physical punishment of children, led, as in so many other social policies, by Sweden, starting in 1979. Notable slow-coaches are the United States, Britain and Australia. But agitation for a parental smacking ban (corporal punishment is already illegal in public institutions) is growing in Australia and recently the Royal Australasian College of Physicians launched a campaign to that end. The college points out that near neighbour New Zealand took this enlightened step in 2007.

An RACP spokeswoman and paediatrician, Susan Moloney, says their move is “not about parenting styles or punishing parents, it’s about protecting children.”

Protecting them from what? Parents who defend smacking today –and the vast majority do – are talking about the occasional swat on a clothed bottom or on the hand or leg of a young child as a corrective in certain circumstances (throwing a tantrum in the supermarket as a form of blackmail, for example), not as a punishment in the sense of making a child “pay the price” for bad behaviour. Few parents today would use or defend anything more than a short, sharp smack.

But for anti-smacking campaigners there is no qualitative difference between a light smack and beating a child; it’s all “hitting” and therefore “violence”. Moreover they claim there is a slippery slope from smacking to outright abuse. These claims are found over and over in the literature of the anti-smacking movement.

Less smacking, less child abuse?

It is true that there is some horrific child abuse today, and it seems to be increasing. But is banning a mild form of physical correction a remedy?

Not noticeably in New Zealand. The country’s official child welfare agency figures show that, since the no-smacking law was passed in 2007, substantiated cases of physical abuse have climbed from 2321 to 3249 in the year to June 2012. Emotional and physical abuse as well as child neglect brought the total to over 21,000 confirmed cases last year. Some 50 children have died from extreme abuse in the past five years – the same rate as before the smacking ban.

“Any claims that a ban on smacking will lower child abuse rates are simply hot air,” says Bob McCoskrie, director of Kiwi organisation Family First. In a message to Australians he says that all the ban has done is send the police to the doors of hundreds of good parents, and undermine

the confidence of many. "Almost 600 Kiwi families have had a police investigation for allegations of smacking or minor acts of physical discipline since the anti-smacking law was passed yet only 9 percent of them have been serious enough to warrant charges being laid."

What about Sweden? Trends should be more evident there, although the RACP cites only a 1999 study. This showed that over 20 years public support for "corporal punishment" had declined, identification of children at risk had increased, child abuse mortality was rare, prosecution rates remained steady, and social service intervention had become increasingly supportive and preventive. Notice that their report does not say child abuse or mortality resulting from it had declined. In fact, another study that year concluded there was not enough evidence to say whether child abuse had gone up or down. It indicated that mortality had been low before the ban, and that "a recent Swedish report suggested that the spanking ban has made little change in problematic forms of physical punishment."

Does smacking cause mental health problems?

The case against smacking, however, is not made solely on the ground of child abuse. Experts claim a list of bad effects, and they do seem to have science on their side.

In particular, they have a much-cited meta-analysis of studies of corporal punishment by parents published by the American Psychological Association in 2002. Reviewing the data of 88 studies covering 62 years Elizabeth Gershoff found that spanking was effective at getting kids to do what you want immediately (though she doubted it was a worthwhile goal) but had an undesirable effect on 10 other measures, including aggression and mental health.

Review studies that mash up data from a lot of individual studies are often controversial, and Gershoff's is no exception. Another researcher with published studies on parental corporal punishment, Robert E. Larzelere, criticised it on two major grounds: the types of corporal punishment included and misleading associations.

To take only the first problem: although Gershoff distinguished theoretically between corporal punishment and physical abuse, most the studies she selected included, according to Larzelere, "overly severe" forms such as slapping a child on the face, beating, hitting with a fist, and causing bruising and cuts. Her own report states that terms used in the studies included spanking/slapping/hitting with an object and pinching.

It would not be surprising if tactics like that, which indicate parental anger and a punitive attitude, were associated with more aggression in children or low self esteem, although there would be other, perhaps equally influential factors involved. A broken marriage or the stress of single parenthood and resulting child behaviour problems could be among them.

Not in New Zealand

But what about just smacking? Has anyone bothered to do research on that?

Yes, they have. New Zealand has a long-running study of around 1000 people born in Christchurch in 1972-73 which provides interesting data on many social issues. When they were 26 the study members were asked whether they had been physically punished at home in childhood. Eighty percent of them had: 29 percent were only smacked, 45 percent had been spanked with an object such as a strap or wooden spoon, and 6 percent suffered more extreme punishment, reported researcher Jane Millichamp and colleagues in the NZ Medical Journal.

Six years later the researchers compared these different experiences with mental health and other outcomes, and found that the 29 percent who had only ever been smacked with an open hand had no negative effects later in life. In fact they had similar or even slightly better outcomes than those who were not smacked in terms of aggression, substance abuse, adult convictions and school achievement.

"Study members in the 'smacking only' category of punishment appeared to be particularly high-functioning and achieving members of society," Dr Millichamp said at the time. She also said that the Christchurch study had yielded no evidence of a slippery slope in physical discipline – that parents who used smacking often progressed to abusive punishments. (A search of the NZMJ shows it did not publish these findings.)

Looking again at Sweden, it does not appear that getting rid of smacking has actually improved mental health. A recent OECD report says that as many as one in four 16- to 18-year-olds suffers from a mental disorder making them unfit for work, resulting in a heavy economic burden for the country. Unemployment, of course, tends to harm mental health, but it appears that it is a cause rather than an effect in this case. "School health services are under-resourced and waiting times for school psychologists too long, often exceeding two months," says the OECD.

Another (Eurostat) report on Sweden's high incidence of mental ill health says that in 2000 about one fifth of the 13-year-old boys and girls reported being bullied at least once during the previous months. Either un-smacked young Swedes are overly sensitive, or there is something other than smacking making them aggressive.

Ideology v. vox populi

Even if there were no ill-effects of smacking, however, opponents would still want it outlawed on grounds human dignity and rights. Invoking the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a couple of Australian academics write: "Hitting and unnecessarily hurting children degrades all children who live in societies that allow children to be treated in this way."

This kind of statement of course begs the question of whether smacking is "hitting" and involves "unnecessary" hurt to children. It puts the discussion on ideological rather than scientific grounds. (It also raises the interesting side issue of why, if all hitting is degrading, a book celebrating sado-masochism has been a best seller over the past year or two and now is an eagerly awaited film.)

In any case, most parents see smacking as effective and justifiable when used infrequently. A national poll taken in New Zealand last year showed that while 44 percent of parents had not smacked their children since the 2007 law change, 66 percent would smack to correct in future, 63 percent thought the law should be changed to allow hand smacks, and 81 percent said they would not report someone for smacking.

A larger poll in March this year found that three out of four people back a law change to allow "correctional" smacking of children. And two out of three respondents said they would flout the law and smack their child to correct their behaviour if they thought it was reasonable to do so.

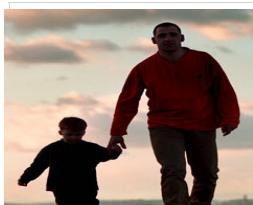
In the absence of evidence that smacking alone does children any immediate or long-term harm or that it is linked with child abuse, the vox populi seems reasonable and Australians would be well advised to reject the RACP policy. Professional groups for their part would do better to address the real causes of child abuse, starting with the breakdown of the family.

Carolyn Moynihan is deputy editor of MercatorNet.

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