

Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth

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PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

On the basis of clear and compelling evidence—that the physical punishment of children and youth plays no useful role in their upbringing and poses only risks to their development—parents should be strongly encouraged to develop alternative and positive approaches to discipline. The implications of this evidence and this goal are examined in relation to Canadian law, human rights and actions taken by other countries.

Recommendations

Recommendations for action in Canada include:

- (1) delivery of public awareness messages to inform all Canadians that physical punishment is harmful to children’s development and is ineffective as discipline;
- (2) development of universal parenting education; and
- (3) provision of the same protection of children from physical assault as is given to

Responsibility for action lies within the jurisdiction of national, provincial and territorial and local levels of government, the mandates of organizations, and the expertise of professionals who serve children and youth. The statement as a whole may be considered an urge to action by professionals and by parents and caregivers—within and beyond their families.

What physical punishment is;

Physical punishment is an action intended to cause physical discomfort or pain to correct a child’s behaviour, to ‘teach a lesson’, or deter the child from repeating the behaviour.

The intended effect is a change in the child’s behaviour. Physical punishment may be administered with the hand or may involve the use of objects, such as rulers, belts and wooden spoons. In some cases it does not involve striking the child—for example, requiring a child to hold an uncomfortable position, kneel on hard objects, or place a foul tasting substance in her mouth.

Some other words for hitting children

- ◆spanking
- ◆smacking
- ◆slapping
- ◆paddling
- ◆whupping
- ◆hiding
- ◆whacking
- ◆thrashing

Some physical punishments that don't involve hitting

- ◆washing a child's mouth out with soap
- ◆requiring a child to remain motionless or in a sitting position without a chair
- ◆forcing a child to kneel on a floor grate
- ◆isolation in a confined space
- ◆denying a child use of the toilet
- ◆forced physical exertion
- ◆placing hot pepper sauce in a child's mouth
- ◆denying access to needed water, food or sleep

What physical punishment is not;

Physical punishment should not be confused with protective physical restraint, which is the application of external control, not to punish, but to protect the child or others from physical pain and harm.

Examples of protective restraint are holding a child back from a busy road, pulling a child's hand away from a hot stove, or holding a child who is hurting another.

Physical punishment should not be confused with self-defence, which is not intended to correct behaviour, but to *protect oneself* from harm.

Terms used in this document

While 'physical discipline', 'corporal punishment' and 'spanking' are commonly used terms, 'physical punishment' will be used in this document for the following reasons.

- 'Physical discipline' confuses the concepts of *discipline* and *punishment*. Discipline encompasses a wide range of philosophies and methods properly aimed at protecting, socializing and guiding children toward self-control, independence, and respect for oneself and others. The practice of physical punishment is at odds with the concept of discipline.
- 'Corporal punishment' has a connotation of severity, and is associated with acts such as caning and belting.
- 'Spanking' connotes triviality and is associated with light taps and slaps of hands and buttocks.

‘Physical punishment’ includes the entire range of potentially painful and injurious acts, whatever their degree or outcome and regardless of the intent behind them.

Prevalence

To estimate the true prevalence of physical punishment is a challenge. Because physical punishment does not occur frequently throughout the day in most families, it is difficult for researchers to observe and record. As a result, estimates of its prevalence are most often based on parental reports, which are subject to errors of recall and parents’ willingness to report behaviour they often regret. Further, variation in methods of data collection—from questionnaires to telephone surveys to in person interviews—can lead to variations in responses. Therefore, *prevalence estimates are likely to underestimate actual rates of the use of physical punishment and lead to conflicting findings.*

Myths about child rearing

- ◆shaking a baby will teach him not to cry
- ◆biting a child will teach her not to bite
- ◆hitting a child will teach him not to hit
- ◆the threat of a spanking will encourage better eating
- ◆spankings will speed up toilet training
- ◆a good slap will end a tantrum
- ◆striking a ‘rebellious’ teenager will prevent delinquency

In fact, in all of these situations physical punishment is likely to worsen the behaviour, increasing the parent’s frustration and, in turn, the intensity of the punishment.

Physical punishment of infants and toddlers sometimes takes the form of shaking. For information on Shaken Baby Syndrome, see Joint Statement on Shaken Baby Syndrome, Health Canada, Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Ottawa, 2001.

Most parents would prefer to use alternative methods to teach their children, resolve conflict and deal with their own frustration 6. In a study of the educational needs of Canadian parents of young children, 91% reported that they believe information about discipline should be made available on a wide scale. Mothers are less likely to use physical punishment when they are exposed to clear and intense messages from professionals and from the media that discourage its use. Public education seems, therefore, a potentially powerful mechanism for decreasing caregivers’ use of physical punishment and increasing their use of effective discipline strategies.

Which children are most likely to receive physical punishment?

Physical punishment is most commonly used with preschoolers who are in a stage of high activity, exploration and drive for independence. Children in this age group also are likely to exhibit negativism, impulsivity and limited understanding of harm and danger. A substantial proportion of older children also experience physical punishment

**Physical punishment
of an infant may
happen this way**

parent expects infant to be able to sleep on schedule and control his crying

—

infant cries at 3 a.m.

parent feeds infant

infant continues to cry

parent experiences crying as stressful and interprets crying as resistance to attempts to comfort

parent becomes frustrated and angry

parent shakes or strikes the infant

Physical punishment of a preschooler may happen this way

adult expects child to have self-control

—

child has strong drive to explore, limited understanding of damage and danger

child touches expensive object

adult tells her to stop

child does not stop

adult interprets child's behaviour as defiance

adult becomes angry

adult strikes child

Children are most likely to be physically punished for behaviours that can harm themselves or others.

It is ironic that caregivers are most likely to strike children when they are trying to either prevent injury to the child or teach her that hitting is wrong.

Boys are more likely to be physically punished than girls, although some studies suggest this gender difference may be small.

What are the risk factors for use of physical punishment?

Several factors increase the risk of use of physical punishment. The more of these risk factors present in a parent's life, the greater the likelihood the parent will use physical punishment.

Parental anger in response to conflict with a child

The more anger a parent feels in response to conflict with a child, the more likely it is that physical punishment will occur.

Parent's own experience of physical punishment as a child or youth

Parents who were themselves physically punished in childhood or adolescence are more likely to respond to their own children's behaviour this way than are parents who do not have a history of being physically punished.

Parental belief systems

Parents who interpret child misbehaviour as intentional and serious—as defiance rather than a developmental stage—are more likely to use physical punishment. *Parents' approval of physical punishment is a very important factor in its use.* It has been found to be more important than parental mood, anger, or childhood experience of physical punishment. In a study examining the power of eight parental variables to predict mothers' use of physical punishment with their preschoolers, approval of its use was found to be the most powerful predictor.

Parent's gender

In some studies that ask parents to describe their child rearing practices, mothers report using physical punishment more than fathers. Other studies find no gender difference.

Physical punishment of an adolescent may happen this way

adult expects youth to obey all rules

—

youth has strong drive to develop an independent identity

youth breaks curfew

adult interprets youth's behaviour as a challenge to authority; adult grounds youth

youth leaves house without permission

adult interprets youth's behaviour as continued defiance

adult becomes angry; feels powerless; may have relied upon physical punishment in the past

adult strikes youth

Physical punishment of a school-age child may happen this way

adult expects child to 'know better' than to hurt others

—

child and younger sibling argue over toy

adult instructs child to take turns

child tries to grab toy anyway

adult warns child that toy will be taken away if behaviour continues

child hits sibling and grabs toy

adult interprets child's behaviour as defiant and aggressive; believes child must learn that aggression is a serious misbehaviour

adult strikes child

When is physical punishment most likely to be used?

A typical situation resulting in physical punishment begins with a parent whose sense of control is threatened by a child's behaviour.

For example, when a child has difficulty with self-control, or when a child exhibits a desire for independence or a teenager tests the standards of the family and the community, a parent may perceive the behaviour as defiance. Believing that the behaviour is an intentional challenge to parental authority, the parent becomes angry. If this parent experienced physical punishment as a child, or believes that it is an appropriate means of gaining control, or feels desperate to maintain authority, physical punishment is a likely outcome. On the other hand, a parent with knowledge of child development who has appropriate expectations for a child's behaviour is likely to interpret a drive for independence, or testing, as just that. This parent is less likely to become angry in response to the child's behaviour and is, therefore, less likely to use physical punishment. Rather, this parent will guide the child to understanding how to behave in the circumstances.

However, even a parent who understands a child's motivations and knows effective techniques for guiding behaviour will, at some time, feel frustrated and angry. This is particularly likely to happen when the parent is in a bad mood, tired, or stressed by life's demands. At such a time, any parent can respond emotionally, rather than intellectually, and strike a child.

Physical punishment is often an impulsive act, driven by emotion, rather than by reason. In fact, the majority of parents, even many of those who think that physical punishment is acceptable, do not think that it works. Most feel regret after striking their children. Sometimes it is not so much punishment as retaliation.

Are there risks associated with use of physical punishment?

Child injury

Physical punishment places children at risk of physical injury.

Most cases of child physical abuse occur during episodes of physical punishment. In a 1998 national study of child maltreatment, it was estimated that more than 10,000 substantiated cases of child physical abuse in Canada took place within the context of punishment. These constituted over two thirds of all substantiated child physical abuse cases in that year.

Although caregivers may be attempting to protect children from danger when they punish them physically, they are actually increasing the likelihood that they themselves will harm the children.

The more strongly caregivers approve of physical punishment, the more harshly they administer it 10 59 60. And the more often caregivers use even mild physical punishment, the more likely they are to inflict severe violence.

In a Quebec study, children who experienced minor physical violence (e.g., pinching, shaking, spanking) were seven times more likely to experience severe violence (e.g., punching, kicking, hitting with an object) than those who had not been subjected to minor physical violence. Therefore, physical punishment is likely to escalate into injurious violence in the lives of many children.

Parent-child relationship

Deliberately inflicted pain can lead to fear, anxiety, insecurity and anger in a child, eroding the parent-child relationship as he learns to avoid his parent. Over time, parent-child communication may be impaired such that by adolescence, a youth with this earlier experience would be less likely to turn to her parents for advice or help. Even at two years of age, children who are physically punished are more likely to distance themselves from their mothers than those who are not physically punished.

Four ways in which physical punishment can escalate to injury

1. Caregiver believes that physical punishment works; when the child does not respond, the caregiver increases the intensity of the punishment.

2. Caregiver may have a disciplinary intent, but her frustration, anger or stress increases the level of force beyond what was intended.
3. Caregiver feels powerless and desperate to regain control.
4. Caregiver's motive is not only punitive, but retaliatory.

Child mental health

Physical punishment is a risk factor for poorer child mental health. It is associated with depression, unhappiness and anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness in children and youth.

Child reasoning and problem solving

Children who receive physical punishment are less likely to internalize moral values than children who are not physically punished. Physical punishment is associated with lower levels of resistance to temptation, lower levels of altruistic behaviour, and lower levels of empathy and moral judgment. This could be because it relies on external controls, rather than building on internal ones. Physical punishment may focus the child's attention on the consequences of his behaviour for himself, rather than on how it affects others 72. The erosion of the parent-child relationship associated with physical punishment may also decrease children's motivation to internalize their parents' values.

Child behaviour

Given the above findings, it is not surprising that *physical punishment has been associated consistently with increased levels of aggression in children and youth.* In her analysis of 27 studies of this relationship, Gershoff found that physical punishment was associated with increased child aggression in all children involved. Children who receive physical punishment have an increased tendency to act out, attack their siblings, hit their parents and retaliate aggressively against peers. Another study demonstrated that physical punishment of 13-year-old boys predisposes them to physically assaulting their girlfriends several years later. Physical punishment has been associated with increased antisocial behaviour in children and youth (e.g., bullying, lying, lack of remorse) in 11 of 12 studies of this relationship.

While many parents believe that physical punishment will keep their children out of trouble, *delinquency and antisocial behaviour have been found to increase over the long term in children who are physically punished.*

How does physical punishment contribute to child behaviour problems?

1. Physical punishment serves as a model, rather than an inhibitor, of aggression.
2. Physical punishment may interfere with the development of trust in the relationship with the parent, reducing the child's desire to comply.
3. If compliance is controlled by physical punishment, the child's internal motive to comply in the punisher's absence is weakened.

4. Fear of physical punishment focuses the child's attention on consequences to himself, rather than the consequences of his behaviour for others.

Parents who use physical punishment to teach their children not to hit or bully others are actually more likely to increase their children's aggression and antisocial behaviour over the long term.

Adult adjustment

Childhood experience of physical punishment is related to negative outcomes long into adulthood.

Since decreased levels of moral internalization and increased levels of aggression are among these outcomes, it is not surprising that physical punishment in childhood has been linked to the development of adult antisocial behaviour. Physical punishment was consistently associated with higher levels of adult aggression (4 of 4 studies), criminal and antisocial behaviour (4 of 5 studies), and abuse of one's own child or spouse (5 of 5 studies) in Gershoff's analysis.

Childhood experience of physical punishment also was found to be associated with poorer adult mental health (e.g., depression, alcoholism) in all of the eight studies in this analysis. In a study of Ontario residents, those who reported having been slapped or spanked as children, but not physically or sexually abused, had an increased lifetime rate of anxiety disorders and alcohol use or dependence.

Adult definitions of violence

Another long-term effect of physical punishment that is evident in adulthood is greater tolerance of violence.

For example, the strongest predictor of adult approval of a particular punishment is having experienced that punishment as a child. The rate of approval of common (e.g., shaking, hitting with a belt) and severe (e.g., burning, tying up) physical punishments is two to three times greater among those who have experienced them than among those who have not. Even among those who have been severely punished (e.g., punched, choked), the majority do not consider these acts to have been abusive.

Clearly, seriously abusive behaviour can be perceived as normal if it is part of one's early personal experience.

Personal definitions of normal and abusive discipline are then carried into parenting practice, where they will influence the likelihood of the cycle of maltreatment continuing.

It is important to note, however, that risk is not destiny.

Many adults who were physically punished as children commit themselves to never striking their own children.

Summary of the risks and benefits of physical punishment

Research findings on physical punishment are remarkably consistent. *They link its use to many negative developmental outcomes in children. As well, no positive long-term developmental outcomes have been identified by the research on physical punishment.*

It is a risk factor for physical injury of a child and erosion of the parent-child relationship, as well as for poorer psychological adjustment and increased levels of aggression throughout life. Furthermore, it perpetuates the use of violence by the next generation.

What can parents and caregivers do instead?

An important goal of parenting is to provide children with a repertoire of problem-solving skills and the competence and confidence to use them throughout their lives.

The choices that parents make in disciplinary situations provide powerful models to children of aggression or self-control, retaliation or problem-solving, intimidation or communication, bullying or empathy.

These choices provide children with a set of enabling or disabling responses for contending with everyday challenges in child care settings, schools, neighbourhoods and in sports. Because physical punishment is at best ineffective in teaching socially appropriate behaviour—and potentially physically and emotionally harmful—caregivers should be strongly encouraged to develop alternative, positive approaches to discipline.

In 1995, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Canada launch educational campaigns to decrease public support for physical punishment.

In order to build their caregiving competence, parents can:

- improve their problem-solving skills
- understand the child's point of view
- learn more about normal developmental stages
- learn effective ways of communicating with children
- model and reinforce positive behaviours
- develop skills to prevent parent-child conflict
- recognize anger triggers and form strategies for managing them
- reduce personal and family stress.

Methods of guiding young children's behaviour

- ◆ *restructuring* the environment so that the child can explore safely
- ◆ *distracting* the child from dangerous objects
- ◆ *modeling* appropriate behaviour
- ◆ *explaining* and teaching
- ◆ *supervising* the child
- ◆ *reinforcing* desired behaviour
- ◆ *preparing* the child for transitions
- ◆ *planning* for challenging situations
- ◆ *establishing expectations and limits* ahead of time

Methods of guiding behaviour of older children and youth

- ◆ *communicating* expectations clearly
- ◆ *recognizing* positive behaviour

- ◆ *respecting* the child's growing need for independence
- ◆ *modeling* negotiation and problem-solving
- ◆ *explaining* the reasons for rules and limits
- ◆ *listening* to the child's perspective
- ◆ *helping* the child to find ways to express himself
- ◆ *teaching* fairness and justice