

Parents: Discipline, Punishment and Child Abuse

A Four Decade Study of Child Rearing Attitudes and Practices

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Child abuse has been very much in the news recently. Each time a child dies because of it, there is much publicity, much media soul-searching, numerous pronouncements from spokespeople but there is little change. Parental use of physical punishment and child abuse are inextricably linked, and the only sure and certain way to save children from abuse is to prevent parents from striking their children (Straus 2000).

I have come to this conclusion after forty years of research and study of child rearing practices and attitudes in New Zealand; I have also twice visited Sweden, the first European country to ban parental use of physical punishment, once just before the law change in 1979, and again in 1995 where the issue had simply become a non-issue; parents no longer hit, and few, very few, children died at the hands of their parents or caregivers (Durrant, 1999). Even new migrants get the message: it is against the law to hit a child. Indeed, children convey the message to other children.

James Ritchie and I have surveyed New Zealand parenting practices each decade since the early 1960's. In the first study we collected data from mothers only; we then interviewed both mothers and fathers in the 70's, 80's and 90's. We have information on how mothers and fathers deal with the common stages and difficulties in their children's development; who does what with the baby and the young child and how parents feel about their roles and their relationships in the family (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970, 1997, Jane Ritchie,

1979, 1993, 1997).

In this article, I will present material on discipline, how parents train their children and on their attitudes to one form of discipline, in particular, since physical punishment is, I believe, not only an undesirable and risky form of child training, but is also a training ground for future adult behaviour, particularly violent behaviours (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1990)

The 1960's

Our first study, conducted in the early 1960's, and reported in 'Child Rearing Patterns in New Zealand' in 1970, revealed a picture of devoted and responsible mothers, bringing up young children largely unsupported by their 'fun fathers', who came home in the evening and romped with them before bedtime.

The mothers we interviewed (mothers of four year olds) relied heavily on negative methods of child training such as scolding, shouting and smacking. These practices are generally regarded as less effective than the more positive and effective methods such as reasoning, explanations, praise and reward (Straus, 1994).

However, the mothers regarded these positive approaches with deep suspicion. Rewarding was seen as tantamount to bribery and praising was thought to make a child swollen-headed. Explanations were regarded by many to be a waste of time, since four year old children were not believed to be capable of reasoning or understanding.

Punishment was regarded as 'being as necessary for child rearing as the

midmorning cup of tea is for sanity - the mother's ever-present help in time of trouble' (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970 p 112). Only one of the 150 mothers we interviewed in the sixties had never smacked her child.

In our comments on our data, we wondered why mothers did not reason and praise more and were concerned about the few children who suffered regular and severe beatings. But we were ignorant then of the many undesirable, sometimes dangerous, side effects or consequences of parental use of physical punishment.

The 1970's

In the late 1970's, prompted by our students, we decided to repeat the study, updating it with questions about new developments in New Zealand society, such as the now almost universal availability of television, and this time we interviewed fathers as well as mothers.

Our seventies sample reflected demographic changes that had occurred in the intervening time between the two studies: families were smaller and more mothers were in paid employment. Fathers were spending more time with their children and mothers reported more satisfaction with their maternal role. But in spite of these positive changes, mothers continued to make frequent use of physical punishment. Although the number who had never smacked had increased from less than 1% to 10%, nearly 40% of the 70's mothers smacked their child once a week; 16% did so daily. The number of

children smacked weekly or more often was 55%, compared with 35% in the 60's sample (Jane Ritchie, 1979).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this more frequent use of smacking, the 70's mothers found it to be less effective. Only 14% of the 1970's mothers found it to be unequivocally effective, compared to 41 % of the 60's mothers. The fact that physical punishment is so often ineffective can lead to its escalation with the consequent risk of child abuse (Straus, 1994).

About a quarter of the mothers were sure that they were doing the right thing but nearly a half felt bothered or guilty when they hit their children. The seven percent who told us that they simply could not help themselves and were carried away by their own anger when they hit the child might seem a small number but these mothers would seem to be in danger of going too far in the heat of the moment and could be placing their child at risk of child abuse. These could be the parents of the 95 000 children estimated to be seriously at risk (Margaret Evelyn, Liaison Social Worker, personal communication, Chapple 1994).

But there were also some positive changes in parental disciplinary practices. The 70's mothers were more likely to praise their children for good behaviour and to make a point of explaining to the children the reasons they approved or disapproved of their behaviour. Since positive methods of behaviour control are generally more effective in producing the desired behaviour than negative practices, this was clearly a change for the better.

The 70's study enabled us for the first time to compare the answers of mothers and fathers (Jane Ritchie, 1979). There was no difference in the reported frequency of physical punishment. However, as the fathers spent less time with their children, I inferred that, per child contact hour, fathers smacked more often than the mothers. They were also more likely to find physical punishment effective and to believe that they were doing the right thing when they hit their children. Fathers praised less and reasoned less and were more likely to hit their sons than their daughters.

One can detect in this data a cyclical pattern: fathers hit more than

mothers and hit their sons more than their daughters; when the boys grow up, they, in turn, believe in the rightness of physical punishment as a way of solving human conflicts (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1993).

Overall, the continuing, indeed more frequent, use of physical punishment in the second study was puzzling and a cause for concern. Why should this be, given the more favourable aspects of child rearing such as smaller family size, increased maternal satisfaction and greater father participation reported by the 70's mothers? In such circumstances, one might have expected less, rather than more, physical punishment. These data galvanised us into researching and then recognising the role of physical punishment and its relationship to power and control in families; we also became aware of punitive attitudes and practices in society, generally (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1981, Ritchie and Ritchie, 1990).

The 1980's

In the 1980's I repeated the study, this time adding in new questions about video programmes and computer games. Although the number of mothers hitting once a week or more often had decreased from 55% to 50%, the number never having hit their four year old had dropped from 10% to 2%. The 80's mothers seemed to find smacking more effective than their 70's counterparts, but more felt guilty when they hit, a reflection, perhaps, of growing social awareness of the possible harm from parental use of physical punishment. More made use of alternative punishments, like sending the child to the room or depriving the child of toys or a desired food. Over 60%, compared to 45% in the 70's, reported that they made a point of reasoning with their children and praising them for good behaviour.

As in the 70's, fathers and mothers made similar use of physical punishment. However, as fathers continued to spend less time with their children, although many wished that they could spend more, again, per contact hour, fathers used more physical punishment (Jane Ritchie, 2001). Only a third of fathers and mothers found it unequivocally effective or felt that they

were doing the right thing. More, almost two thirds of parents, felt guilty or bothered when they hit their children. They were adding new control methods to their repertoire, but still were not secure enough to relinquish the old. Smacking is still too often thought of as 'tried and true', rather than as potentially dangerous (Thompson 2000). Mothers continued to praise and reason more with their children than did the fathers.

The 1990's

The decade replications continued with the late 90's study. About a half of both mothers and fathers continued to hit once a week or more often. Mothers (65%) said that they hit because they could not help themselves; fathers (54%) believed it was the only thing that the child understands. Some parents (14% mothers, 17% fathers) found it quick and convenient but fathers (16%) were more likely than mothers (2%) to hit their children when they were tired and cross. About a third of parents found that smacking had little effect on the child's behaviour, about 40% found it moderately effective and 15% found it equivocally effective.

More fathers (32%) than mothers (20%) felt that they were doing the right thing; fathers (30%, compared to 21% of mothers) felt a bit bothered, a little uneasy, when they smacked the children but half of the mothers (compared to only 28% of the fathers) actually felt guilty, a more negative attitude towards the practice than simply feeling uncomfortable about it.

The reason many continued to smack, they said, was that they did not know what else to do. Clearly, this finding suggests that more parent education pitched in acceptable and effective ways is needed and all professionals who work with children and families have a role in this. They have a responsibility to indicate to clients in the most appropriate way possible that their current practices may be putting the child at risk, that there are safer and more effective child training techniques available and that they can be learned and applied by any parent. They may not have the time, themselves, to work with parents on alternative forms of discipline but there are many community groups which provide such education.

Parents did make limited use of other disciplinary techniques. About a half of both mothers and fathers sometimes deprived a child of privileges or treats; about the same number made use of a time out by sending the child to his/her room.

Slightly more mothers (65%) than fathers (59%) made a point of praising their child for good behaviour; this is a noticeable increase from the number of mothers (42%) and fathers (22%) in the seventies who believed in recognising a child's good behaviour. More parents used other positive techniques such as gold stars and special treats.

There has also been a significant increase by both parents in the use of reasoning. More than two thirds said that they made a point of reasoning with their child, compared with only forty-five percent of mothers and eighteen percent of fathers in the 1970's.

In the seventies study, we found that fathers of sons were more likely to use physical punishment than the fathers of daughters. This was no longer the case in the 90's study, but we did find that there were more daughters (8%) than sons (2%) who had never been hit. Fathers of sons (21%) were more likely to feel that they were doing the right thing when they hit their boys than were fathers of daughters (11%); fathers of daughters felt more bothered when they hit than did fathers of sons.

Changing the Law

For many years we have been advocating a change in the law (Section 59 of the Crimes Act) which permits parents to use reasonable force to punish their children. This law protects parents from legal sanctions if a judge or jury, as happened in two cases in 2001, were to decide that the force used was reasonable in the circumstances, but does nothing to protect children, after the event, if the judge or jury, decide that the force used had not been reasonable.

Sweden removed its legal equivalent of Section 59 in 1979 and between 1976 and 1996 has suffered only 4 child deaths from child abuse (Durrant 1999); in New Zealand, with a population roughly 40% that of Sweden, 240 children have died at the hands of

their parents or caregivers in the same period of time. New Zealand is not Sweden; social circumstances and attitudes to children are different but I believe these statistics are compelling. I also believe that the level of public concern about abuse has never been higher, given the media coverage of such tragedies.

It is, therefore, most disappointing that the Government has decided not to comply at the present time with the recommendation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Committee in 1997 that Section 59 be deleted. The Committee believes it contravenes Article 19 of the Convention which prohibits all forms of violence towards children.

At the end of 2000, in its second periodic report on its adherence to the Convention, the Government expressed the view that physical force administered by parents that is reasonable in the circumstances was not violent (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2000) but it also endorsed the use of alternative child training practices and believed that education will 'encourage parents to find alternatives to corporal punishment of children' (p 87).

The report mentions Child Youth and Family's various media campaigns which, it says, have been successful in changing attitudes "from pre-contemplation to contemplation of the alternatives to smacking" (p 87) though, as my data indicates, parental behaviour has not yet changed. Education about alternatives is certainly important, but parents must be supported as they contemplate alternatives and begin to use them.

At the end of 2001, in response to a survey (Carswell, 2001) which found that 80% of those surveyed supported the use of 'light physical discipline' Justice Minister Phil Goff restated the Government's belief in education programmes rather than law change. However, he added 'it is likely that eventually public attitudes will move towards repealing legal sanctioning of smacking as has now happened in most European countries' (New Zealand Herald 20/12/01).

I first raised the question of Section 59 and its sanction of parental use of physical punishment at a New Zealand

Psychological Society conference in the early 1970's. Members at that AGM debated whether the Society would support a resolution calling upon the Government to delete the clause. Although all members who spoke agreed that parental use of physical punishment was to be deplored as an ineffective and possibly harmful child training technique, the resolution was not supported; it was felt that education, not law change, was the way forward. The Society was not then ready to become involved in social issues.

In the late 1980's I raised the issue again at a Society conference at the University of Waikato. This time, the Society agreed that a letter should be sent to the Government urging it to remove Section 59 from the statute books. This representation was ignored, as have been all others since.

Public Opinion

So we must wait for public opinion to change, through the rather slow process of public education, rather than making use of a change in the law, the deletion of Section 59, which would, because of the inevitable controversy such an action would arouse, result in immediate changes in parents' awareness and attitudes. In the meantime, sufficient resources must be dedicated not only to providing education to all parents at all stages of the family's growth and development but also more resources must be made available to support families as they begin to implement new child training techniques. Fortunately, there are now many different resources available to parents, ranging from the CYFs brochures and pamphlets to the excellent booklets published by EPOCH (Choose to Hug, Not to Smack) and the Peace Foundation (Thanks not Spanks).

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But OSH should remain the prime authority for initiating prosecutions, because the Crown should carry the main responsibility for ensuring the safety of citizens.

Conclusion

The proposed Amendment Bill seeks to consolidate the policy of affirming the best practices in the psycho-social aspects of occupational health within the framework of the World Health Authority's well-established liberal definition of health. It also shares responsibility between employers and employees for the maintenance of effective functioning of individuals at work. With goodwill it should do much to set improve occupational performance and output to the greater satisfaction of those concerned. As such it is to be supported.

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