
Corporal punishment

International Save the Children Alliance
Position on corporal punishment

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What is corporal punishment?

Definition

Corporal or physical punishment is the use of physical force intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort for discipline, correction, and control, changing behaviour or in the belief of educating/bringing up the child.

Physical pain can be caused by different means such as hitting the child with a hand or other object, kicking, shaking or throwing the child, pinching or pulling the hair, caning or whipping.

The link between corporal punishment and psychological punishment

Corporal/physical punishment can be also psychologically damaging (e.g. causing low self esteem, sadness, shame, depression, etc.). Psychological violence, including humiliating or degrading treatment and threats, can be equally or more harmful to the child.

Scale of the problem

Extent

Accurate data on prevalence of corporal punishment against children is difficult to obtain. Parents and teachers are likely to under-report, and it is not possible to get information from very young children and babies. Both statistical and anecdotal evidence¹ show that corporal punishment is practised in almost every society and that across the world millions of children are being physically and emotionally punished by those who are charged with their care. It is inflicted on children at home, in schools, in medical and care institutions, in detention, in their work places and the streets.

Eleven countries so far have banned all forms of corporal punishment of children. Although corporal punishment has been abolished in schools in several countries, monitoring and enforcement of the law is too often ineffective. In many states corporal punishment is seen as an essential tool for school discipline.

Social acceptance

Common justifications for using corporal punishment are found across different cultures and contexts. Main arguments invoked in favour of corporal punishment are: children need such discipline to learn right from wrong, to be respectful of elders, hard working and obedient; how children are brought up is a private family issue, not a public one; corporal punishment has been passed over generations and nothing wrong has happened to those who received it; parents and teachers are often under high stresses, such as poverty and overcrowding – they argue that these stresses should be first removed.

Impact on children

Physical and psychological damage

Research conducted in different countries reveals the severity of harm that can be inflicted on children when adults try to manage their behaviour. Children may suffer injuries arising from corporal punishment that need medical attention, leave permanent damage and even cause their death. This includes children being knocked unconscious, bleeding, broken limbs, damaged eyes and stitches; being beaten with implements such as canes, belts, or thorns; being whipped or slapped, punched or kicked. In some countries², reported punishment in schools has included being forced to stand for hours in the sun, smoke

red pepper, which causes coughing and vomiting, being made to contort the body into shapes which cause fainting and nose bleeding, pulling hair and ears, forcing pupils into humiliating and painful contortions.

Research findings also point to a correlation between corporal punishment and depression, to low self-esteem, negative psychological adjustment and poor relationships with parents and those in authority³.

Social consequences

The strongest, usually unintended, message that corporal punishment sends to the mind of a child is that violence is acceptable behaviour, that it is all right for a stronger person to use force to coerce a weaker one. This helps to

perpetuate a cycle of violence in the family and in society.

Children's views and experiences

Save the Children's consultations with children in over 15 countries reveal the priority children themselves give to violence in their family and close environment, including the use of corporal punishment, as an issue that needs to be addressed. Children also frequently cite corporal punishment as a reason for dropping out of school. For example, 14 per cent of Nepalese children interviewed had dropped out of school because they were afraid of the teachers.⁴ Kenyan children, left with little remedy against corporal punishment, have responded to injuries and severe punishment by transferring from abusive schools, or by dropping out of school altogether.⁵

What is Save the Children's position on corporal punishment?

Save the Children opposes all forms of corporal punishment on children. This position is based on Save the Children's knowledge of children's experiences and perceptions of corporal punishment and of its impact on children. It is also rooted on children's human rights.

The human rights of the Child

Hitting children breaches human rights, in particular, to respect for every person's human dignity and physical integrity, and to equal protection under the law, upheld in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly protects children from all forms of physical violence (Article 19) and from inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37). It requires school discipline to be "consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention" (Article 28.2). In view of the damage that corporal punishment can do to children's attendance and learning experience, it can also breach Article 28, which stipulates children's right to receive primary education (Article 28.1.a) and requires States to take measures to encourage regular attendance at school and reduce drop-out rates (Article 28.1.e). The General Principles of the CRC, which also inform this position, provide that in all actions concerning children the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration (Article 3); the inherent right of every child to life and to survival and development (Article 6); the right to non discrimination (Article 2) and the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and these views be given due weight (Article 12).

States and Governments should explicitly prohibit all corporal punishment of children and ensure, where legislation is in place, that proper implementation occurs. Legal reform should be accompanied by a public education campaign combined with professional training on positive behaviour management of children for parents, carers, teachers, and other duty bearers.

Why is corporal punishment relevant to Save the Children's work?

Save the Children aims at ending all corporal punishment of children. Save the Children's rights-based approach to programmes enhances this commitment to work on ending corporal punishment. Save the Children's rights-based work is rooted in the recognition of all children as holders of rights. Therefore, accountability of States and other duty bearers for their obligations to fulfil, respect and protect children's rights is central to all its work. Save the Children's work on corporal punishment aims at accountability for children's right to freedom from all forms of violence, starting from where the majority of children experience violence: as punishment within the school and in the home. Children's participation is another cornerstone of child rights' based work. As rights' holders, children should be enabled to know and claim their rights. Corporal punishment is not compatible with the belief in children's right to have their voices heard and to participate in society. Equity and non-discrimination stem from the universality of children's rights. It is therefore central to our work on inclusion and violence to look at the specific prevalence, type and impact of corporal punishment on boys and girls, and on the most vulnerable or marginalized children. Disabled children are reportedly four times more likely to be physically abused.

Addressing corporal punishment is highly relevant to Save the Children major programmatic areas. Save the Children's work on education supports teachers to build a relationship of respect and trust with children, enabling children to question, challenge, analyse and learn for themselves and encourage equal respect for each other. Corporal punishment would be inconceivable within any education system that was genuinely based on the rights of the child. Save the Children works with parents and communities to improve the lives of children, which includes respect for their rights and the removal of violence. Save the Children health programmes need to address prevention/end of corporal punishment, given the prevalence of physical and psychological injuries caused by violence on children by those in care or authority, including the use of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment needs also to be addressed in Save the Children protection programmes dealing with violence and protection in juvenile justice systems, institutions, refugee situations, amongst separated children, etc. In situations of conflict and other emergencies, violence in the home and the communities, as well as State violence, corporal punishment tend to increase. Measures to address corporal punishment need to be included in education and protection programmatic responses in such situations.

What does Save the Children aim to achieve for children

Save the Children's aim is to end all corporal punishment of children. To this end, our four key areas of change are:

Education and Training:

- To shift practice of duty bearers towards non-use of corporal punishment. To see changes in teaching methods and introduce positive parenting/child care.

Legal Reform:

- To ensure effective legislative protection.

Advocacy:

- To end social acceptance of corporal punishment by educating society that corporal punishment is a form of violence to children.
- To increase visibility of corporal punishment as a child rights' violation.

Children's Participation:

- To show the links between children's participation and their effective protection from violence.
- To educate children on positive non-violent relationships.
- To know and understand children's experiences and to help us in identifying and achieving solutions.

In order to achieve these changes we need to take responsibility for our own actions – both professionally and personally. Save the Children's Child Protection Policy includes the responsibility for Save the Children staff not to use violence against children, including corporal punishment. The policy implementation includes both developing a code of conduct and also training staff members on non-violent behaviours to support them not only in the workplace, but as parents, carers and role models in their families and communities.

References

- 1 See statistics and consultations in different countries in *Ending Corporal Punishment*, Save the Children UK, Save the Children Spain and Save the Children Sweden, 2000
 - 2 For example in Ethiopia, Kenya and Pakistan, see *ibid*
 - 3 See Murray A Strauss, *Beating the devil out of them: Corporal punishment in American families*, Lexington Press, 1994
 - 4 See Report of *Save the Children Alliance Regional Workshop on Alternatives to Corporal Punishment*, Dacca, Bangladesh, April 2002
 - 5 *Spare the child: Corporal punishment in Kenyan schools*, Human Rights Watch, 1999
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