

Ending corporal punishment in the early years of childhood: an essential right and need of every young child



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Introduction

Violence against children is widespread across the globe, with devastating short and long-term consequences for individuals and societies. Corporal punishment is the most common form of violence against children and most likely to be experienced early in life, causing injury and death to thousands of young children every year, as well as numerous other impacts to physical and mental health, relationships, and lifelong wellbeing.

Corporal punishment comprises of any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light; as well as other non-physical forms of punishment that are also cruel and degrading.¹

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 1.1 billion parents and caregivers considered corporal punishment necessary to raise a child properly, and 3 out of 4 children younger than five were “spanked”, “smacked”, hit, hit with objects, beaten, or experienced other forms of violent punishment.² Unfortunately, children’s vulnerability and exposure to violence has increased amid the pandemic.³

Corporal punishment is a violation of young children’s rights to respect for their physical integrity, human dignity, health, development, education, and freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Protecting children from all forms of violence - including corporal punishment - is required under international human rights law. Through their ratification of international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 16.2) states are obligated and committed to prohibiting and eliminating corporal punishment in all settings, including the home.



The pervasiveness of violence against young children in the home, childcare, and other settings is particularly concerning as early child development provides the building blocks for lifelong health, educational achievement, economic wellbeing, and societal progress. In the first years of life, children’s brain architecture develops rapidly in response to experiences and environments.⁴ To achieve their developmental potential, children need nurturing care, including health and nutrition, supportive relationships, and protection from violence.⁵ In contrast, exposure to violence can overload children’s stress response and other biological systems, disrupt the brain’s circuitry development, and lead to long-term negative consequences.⁶

Eradicating all forms of violence in early life is critical to ensuring children’s lifelong health, development, and rights, and in building strong, thriving, and peaceful communities. The earlier in life violence is stopped, the greater the beneficial impact. Therefore, it is essential to put in place measures to prohibit and eliminate corporal punishment, sending a clear message that no level of violence in childrearing is acceptable, and supporting parents to adopt positive, non-violent discipline and nurturing caregiving practices.

Efforts to eliminate corporal punishment will also have additional benefits, by reducing tolerance of, and helping to prevent, all other forms of violence against children, enabling earlier intervention by support services when there are concerns, allowing clearer communication about positive methods of childrearing, and raising the status of children across society.

Corporal punishment of children: a global overview

Corporal punishment remains the most common form of violence against young children, across all regions of the world. In low- and- middle-income countries, where more than 90% of young children live, 220.4 million (or three out of four) children aged 2-4 had experienced corporal punishment in the home.² Corporal punishment is especially prevalent in countries with low levels of the Human Development Index and often co-occurs with other adversities like intimate partner violence and poverty, representing an additional burden for children who may already be at risk.

This humiliating and harmful treatment remains lawful in some or all settings of children’s lives in a majority of states: 136 states have yet to prohibit corporal punishment in the home; violent punishment of children remains lawful in day care and/or early education in 129 states; and in schools in 64 states. This means that, to date, 86% of children live in states where corporal punishment is legal in one or more setting of their life. Despite widespread concern about violence against children in alternative care, corporal punishment remains lawful in institutional care and foster care in 129 states.



Can be particularly harmful early in life

The science of human development reveals that violence in early life could lead to particularly severe consequences. In the first years of life, about 1 million new neural connections are formed every second in response to experience and environmental stimuli.⁴ Brain systems that engaged in fear and threat detection, emotion regulation, and executive function (e.g., impulse control) are particularly sensitive to elevated stress activation and exposure to any form of violence. In this developmental period, children also begin to form attachment bonds with their caregivers, and their safety and physical health depends on their caregivers. Consequently, corporal punishment and other forms of violence can profoundly impact the developing brain, damage the parent-child relationship, and even lead to severe injury and death.



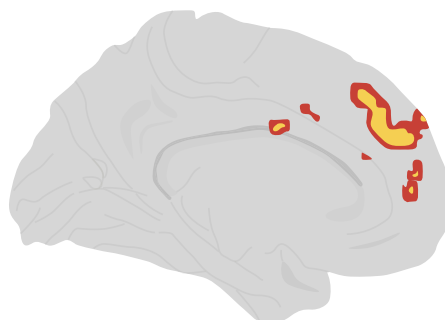
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‘Spanking’ and brain development

A recent study¹³ found that children who experienced ‘spanking’ early in life showed atypical brain functioning in areas of the prefrontal cortex compared to children who had never experienced any form of corporal punishment. These brain areas are often engaged in emotion regulation and social information processing and have already been found to be impacted by harsh forms of violence. Therefore, while some conceptualize ‘spanking’ to be different from abuse, both ‘spanking’ and harsher forms of violence are processed in similar ways by the child’s brain.

These new findings further highlight that distinguishing ‘spanking’ or ‘moderate’ corporal punishment from abuse is meaningless, as both are forms of violence that can lead to negative developmental consequences and violate a children’s right to protection.

In red and yellow: areas that exhibited atypical functioning for children who were spanked early in life.



Risk factors - why do parents and other caregivers use corporal punishment?

Corporal punishment has been almost universally accepted in the majority of societies throughout history, often regarded as a completely normal part of childrearing. Its legitimacy has been embedded in law, religion, and cultural traditions.

Most people were physically punished by their own parents, and most parents have physically punished their own children. The pervasive normalization of a level of violence in childrearing, combined with its very personal nature, has made it difficult for parents and others to recognize corporal punishment as violence, or understand how it undermines wellbeing and respect for children. This is not a matter of punishing parents or blame – parents have acted in accordance with social expectations – but the time has come to move on to positive, non-violent relationships with children, and all the benefits that brings.

Parents, educators, and other caregivers generally want the best for children, but may not have access to the **information, resources and capabilities to offer nurturing care.**⁵

Caregivers require knowledge about early childhood development and positive discipline, realistic expectations about what children are capable of and what they need as they develop, and confidence in their childrearing skills. They also need good mental health and self-regulatory skills to attend to children's cues, manage their own emotions, and respond to children's needs and behaviors appropriately.

Multiple protective factors promote caregivers' capabilities, including strong bonds with family and friends, economic stability, and availability of health, education, and social services. In contrast, risk factors like a history of adversity, poverty, economic/job insecurity, contextual violence, gender inequity, and social norms that legitimize violence can increase caregivers' stress and mental health challenges, promote unfounded beliefs about childrearing, and ultimately undermine their capabilities.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened several protective factors while exacerbating contextual risks (for example, economic insecurity and discrimination), thus eroding caregivers' capabilities and increasing children's vulnerability and exposure to violence.³

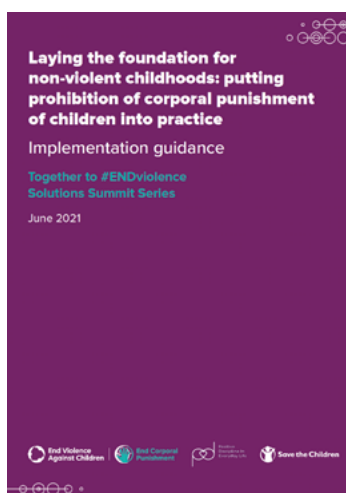


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Strategies to end corporal punishment of young children

Research has shown that with information, support and guidance parents and caregivers can develop and adopt non-violent, nurturing childrearing skills. Governments, policymakers and practitioners can employ multiple strategies to support this process, by clearly communicating through law and public awareness raising that corporal punishment of children is not acceptable, addressing risk factors, and supporting parents and caregivers to eradicate violence and promote the nurturing care of children.

Five key steps to eliminating corporal punishment:



1. Pass legislation that prohibits all corporal punishment of children

The prevalence and widespread social acceptance of violence against children has been underpinned by legislation that permits violence in childrearing. Some states have in place legal defenses or justifications for caregivers' use of corporal punishment. Others have ambiguous legislation that does not explicitly prohibit all forms of violence. As such, all states around the globe should **enact and implement legislation prohibiting all forms of violence against children – including corporal punishment – in all settings**. Doing so aligns with international and regional human rights instruments and global policy objectives stated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, prohibiting corporal punishment can be a catalyst of change in attitudes, social norms, and behaviors by communicating that violence is not acceptable in childrearing.¹⁵

2. Plan and Coordinate

After prohibiting all corporal punishment, countries need to put in place a **costed national action plan to prevent all forms of violence against children**. The roadmap will outline the strategic orientation and activities needed to achieve elimination of corporal punishment and other forms of violence in the country. It will require a coordinating mechanism including all national and local services working with and for children and families, and all government departments and agencies responsible for children, families and public health. The national action plan to end violence against children – explicitly including corporal punishment - will describe programmes and interventions to be implemented at national and community levels.¹⁶ It will include adequate resources to support long-term campaigning for social norm change with the ultimate goal of eradicating violence against children.

3. Communication and awareness raising

An effective strategy to change social norms and increase awareness of positive, non-violent parenting involves extensive education to the public, professionals who interact with families, and to parents and other caregivers. One approach is via **public information and education communications and campaigns** in public spaces and via the media and social media (e.g., radio, tv, social networks). **Integrating violence prevention and positive parenting messages with routine primary health care and educational settings** also offers promise. **Collaborating with professionals and community leaders** who may influence caregivers' attitudes and behaviors, including pediatricians, educators, the workforce of parenting programs, and religious organizations, can increase their awareness and build confidence in counseling caregivers about child behavior management and non-violent parenting and problem solving.



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4. Support parents and caregivers

Parenting programs are a more direct way to support parents and other caregivers. Research conducted in diverse countries robustly demonstrates that parenting programs are effective in decreasing child behavioral problems, reducing caregivers' stress, promoting parenting confidence and knowledge, reducing corporal punishment, and promoting positive parenting.^{17,18}

In general, effective parenting programs include content on (1) understanding children's development, behavior, and needs, (2) emotional and behavior regulation techniques for adults and children, (3) the importance of caregivers' wellbeing, (4) positive discipline strategies (e.g., praising, explaining why certain behaviors might be harmful for children or for others), (5) positive caregiver-child interactions (e.g., engagement in play/learning activities), and (6) the importance of father engagement in childrearing. Most programs have been implemented individually in home-visits or in groups in preschools, primary health settings, or community settings.

In addition, the success of any strategy depends on the **wellbeing and mental health of parents and caregivers**. Mental health challenges (e.g., depression or anxiety) can deplete cognitive resources and self-regulation, potentially eroding the nurturing care of children and triggering impulsive and violent reactions. Consequently, extensive **mental health supports, social policies aimed at supporting financial security** (including cash transfers), and **family friendly policies** like paid **maternal and paternal leave, child benefits, and affordable childcare**, are critical for promoting caregivers' mental health and preventing all forms of violence against children.

5. Evaluate

For the above strategies to be most effective, there is also a need to monitor and evaluate systems and research. Indeed, local data and strengthening, disseminating, and translating scientific evidence on the prevalence, risk factors, and consequences of corporal punishment and other forms of violence, as well as the implementation and effectiveness of programs, can help advocacy efforts, policymaking, and legislation.

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