



White Ribbon

White Ribbon Policy

The issue of corporal punishment of children and men's violence against women in Australia

What is Corporal Punishment?

Corporal punishment is defined as 'the use of physical force towards a child for the purpose of control and/or correction, and as a disciplinary penalty inflicted on the body with the intention of causing some degree of pain or discomfort, however mild'.¹

What is the legal response to corporal punishment?

In relation to corporal punishment by parents, it remains lawful for parents in all jurisdictions to use "reasonable" corporal punishment to discipline their children. New South Wales is the only state to have made legislative amendments concerning corporal punishment by parents.

Australian law permits a parent or other adult in loco parentis 'charged with assaulting a child in their care to argue that the assault was justified as they were using reasonable force to discipline or correct the child'.² However:

- In NSW there are stated limits on what is regarded as reasonable force.
- In seven Australian jurisdictions teachers in government schools are not able to use corporal punishment. In the eighth jurisdiction they are able to use it with the agreement of parents.
- In five Australian jurisdictions teachers in non-government schools are not able to use corporal punishment. In one jurisdiction they are able to use it with the agreement of parents. In the remaining two jurisdictions teachers in non-government schools are able to use corporal punishment.

1 Corporal punishment: Key issues (April 2010) The National Child Protection Clearinghouse. <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs19/rs19.pdf>. Accessed 25 March 2014

2 Corporal punishment: Key issues (April 2010) The National Child Protection Clearinghouse. <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/sheets/rs19/rs19.pdf>. Accessed 25 March 2014

In effect, it is legal for parents and some teachers to use corporal punishment in Australia. Internationally, the physical punishment of children is a clear violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which both Australia and New Zealand are signatories.³

What does the evidence tell us regarding corporal punishment?

Every child requires discipline, and discipline is a part of good parenting.⁴ For those that seek to defend corporal punishment, there is an argument put forward that discipline is distinct from violence. This suggests that, despite the mechanisms of discipline and violence being the same (such as hitting a child), the motivation by parents is one in which the best outcomes are desired for the child in both the short and long term. However, there is international evidence that shows corporal punishment is not in the best interests of the child in the short or long term, particularly as a predictor of later use of violence. This evidence shows that:

- Corporal punishment has limited efficacy as a method of discipline, and has adverse long term effects for children.⁵
- Hitting teaches children that violence is a mechanism to manage conflict, and a method to obtain gains.⁶

3 Position Statement: Physical Punishment of Children (June 2013) The Royal Australasian College of Physicians Paediatric & Child Health Division. <https://www.racp.edu.au/index.cfm?objectid=288919C9-F0F7-002C-A7C36836F34E047E>. Accessed 25 March 2014

4 Position Statement: Physical Punishment of Children (June 2013) The Royal Australasian College of Physicians Paediatric & Child Health Division. <https://www.racp.edu.au/index.cfm?objectid=288919C9-F0F7-002C-A7C36836F34E047E>. Accessed 25 March 2014

5 Position Statement: Physical Punishment of Children (June 2013) The Royal Australasian College of Physicians Paediatric & Child Health Division. <https://www.racp.edu.au/index.cfm?objectid=288919C9-F0F7-002C-A7C36836F34E047E>. Accessed 25 March 2014

6 NAPCAN (2013) Alternatives to Smacking Children. <http://napcan.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/smackingalternatives.pdf>. Accessed 16 June 2014.

- In two collective meta-analyses of over 100 studies, corporal punishment is linked to antisocial behaviour and aggression, as well as mental health issues later in life.⁷⁸⁹
- Countries that make corporal punishment illegal have shown some decreases in gendered crime, such as sexual assault.¹⁰
- Experiencing corporal punishment as a child is linked to later violence against female intimate partners.¹¹
- Witnessing or experiencing family violence as a child is one of the key contributing factors for violence against women in our community.¹²

I'm a parent, who can I talk to?

NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) recommends the following helplines:

- Parentline ACT (02) 6287 3833
- Parentline NSW 1300 1300 52
- Parentline NT 1300 30 1300
- Parentline QLD 1300 30 1300
- Parent Helpline SA 1300 364 100
- Parenting Line TAS 1300 808 179
- Parentline VIC 13 22 89
- Parenting Line WA 1800 654 432

Please also refer to the brochure [Alternatives to Smacking Children](#) (NAPCAN, 2013).

In summary, evidence suggests that not only is corporal punishment ineffective as a disciplinary measure, but that it may have long term effects on a child's aggression and antisocial behaviour, as well as links to violence against women later in life.

When a big child hits a small child in the playground, we call him a bully; five years later he punches a woman for her handbag and is called a mugger; later still, when he slugs a workmate who insults him, he is called a troublemaker; but when he becomes a father and hits his tiresome, disobedient or disrespectful child, we call him a disciplinarian.

What is White Ribbon Australia's position?

White Ribbon Australia is committed to preventing violence against women. Based on the evidence presented here, corporal punishment is identified as both a form of violence and as a variable that may influence a child's later use of violence in adult life. For these reasons, White Ribbon does not condone the use of corporal punishment as a means of discipline.

7 As summarised in Durrant, J. E. (2000) Trends in youth crime and well-being since the abolition of corporal punishment in Sweden. *Youth & Society*, Vol.31(4), pp.437-455.

8 Gershoff, E.T. (2002) Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 128(4), pp. 539-579.

9 Kawabata, Y., Alink, L., Tseng, W-L., van IJzendoorn, M., Crick, N. (2011) Maternal and paternal parenting styles associated with relational aggression in children and adolescents: A conceptual analysis and meta-analytic review. *Developmental Review*, Vol.31(4), pp.240-278.

10 Durrant, J. E. (2000) Trends in youth crime and well-being since the abolition of corporal punishment in Sweden. *Youth & Society*, Vol.31(4), pp.437-455.

11 Straus, M.A & Kantor, G. K. (1994) Corporal punishment of adolescents by parents: A risk factor in the epidemiology of depression, suicide, alcohol abuse, child abuse, and wife beating. *Adolescence*, Vol 29(115), pp.543-561.

12 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) (2007) Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria. VicHealth: Melbourne, Australia.

13 Leach P. *Children First*. London: Penguin; 1994