

Should Parents Smack Children?

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In the year 2007, the Government of New Zealand passed a bold new law: *It is a criminal offense to smack children*. In the months leading up to this law change, the country was rife with debate. The newspapers, television, and radio talkshows became obsessed with the question of whether the law should be passed. There were protests in the streets, and people on both sides of the debate argued strongly for their position. The arguments were heated, and most of the time rationality was lost in the thick of emotion.

But why were people arguing? Well, many parents held (and continue to hold) the view that it is their right to discipline their children in whatever way they see fit. They suggest that using smacking is the best way to ensure their children behave and keep themselves safe. An often used example runs like this:

Imagine that your child is heading towards a power socket with a knife. A quick smack on the hand will deter the child while teaching him quickly that power sockets are dangerous. A smack is a far less damaging way to teach the child than allowing them to insert the knife and learn the other way.

Parents against the law change worried that they would be classed as criminals if they continued to use smacking as a means to modify their children's behavior.

On the other side of the debate, supporters of the new law argued that the law would help protect the rights of children and would result in a drop in cases of physical abuse against children. Up until the law change, abusers of children could escape prosecution by hiding behind a "reasonable force" clause in the law. As it was, the law allowed for reasonable use of force to control children's behavior. Now, for most people, reasonable force might be a smack on the hand, but for other people, reasonable force might be a belt across the leg. The problem with the law was that "reasonable force" is a subjective term and open to interpretation.

During the months leading up to the law change, society remained evenly split on both sides of the debate. The law *did* change, however, and it is now a criminal offense to smack a child.

Recently, there has been a call to revisit the issue. People have been campaigning for a repeal in the law and a reversion to the old system. Many parents want the right to smack their children. Now, whenever this type of issue enters the public consciousness, I worry about the level of rationality in the argumentation. People tend to argue emotively and forget to think things through. This happens because people care very deeply about their opinions and personal views. But emotive arguments are bad arguments. They lack persuasive power and are usually very weak. That is part of the reason why debates on issues can become heated and go around in endless circles.

To throw some rationality into the mix, I am going to take a step-by-step approach and look at the issues underlying the "right to smack a child" debate. By looking at these issues in a methodical way, I will demonstrate that as an enlightened society, we ought not to smack children.

Behavior Modification

When we punish or reward children, we are doing so primarily to modify their behavior. It is true that sometimes a punishment might result from the anger of a parent, with not much thought given to whether the child's behavior needs modification. Such cases are reflexive and have not been thought through, but the result is the same. There will be a modification to the child's behavior—especially if the punishment occurs consistently as the result of a specific behavior. There are different types of *behavior modification*, and the result is known as *conditioning*. It is important to get the terminology correct, so that we can talk intelligently about the issue.

Positive Punishment

Many people believe that smacking (or any sort of punishment) is *negative reinforcement*, but this is an incorrect use of the terminology. Smacking is what psychologists refer to as a *positive punishment*. Put simply, it is the introduction (or addition) of some undesired stimulus into the child's environment, with the purpose of *reducing* a behavior. The word "positive" refers to the addition of the undesired stimulus, and the word "punishment" refers to the reduction of a behavior. The term "negative reinforcement" means the *removal* of something undesired in order to reinforce a behavior. For example, imagine a child sitting in a classroom with a cold wind blowing on him. When the child does something "good", the window is closed thus removing the cold wind from the child's environment.

Positive punishment occurs in nature. Animals will take a swipe at their offspring if they exhibit unwanted behavior. You see this when you watch large cats, such as tigers. When a cub starts chewing on its mother's ear, she will flick him away. It hurts the small cub, whose behavior will slowly alter with repeated punishments. Now, animals are not rational. They simply respond to

events in reflexive ways. If the mother tiger gets annoyed, she responds automatically. This also happens in the case of human parents. A large percentage of smacking incidents occur because parents feel an instinctual surge of anger and quickly strike their child. They probably regret the event immediately after it has occurred. There is also a percentage of smacking incidents that occur through the rational decision of the parent. They decide that the best way to alter their child's behavior is to punish them with a well thought out, calculated smack. This use of positive punishment is what people are arguing for. They believe that the most effective way to modify behavior is through punishment.

Suppose we accept that punishment is the best way to modify behavior. The question we need to ask is, *why does the punishment need to consist of physical pain?* Surely we do not want to teach our children that physical pain is the best way to change undesired behavior. They might go to school and hit their class mates when they do something undesired. And if they do, then how shall we modify that behavior? By hitting them back? It sets up a cycle of punishment, which is a problem that I will explore later in the paper. Perhaps a better system of positive punishment is the use of a stern voice. This can be effective and does not require the application of pain. Another option may be the use of a loud whistle, which can signify danger, or alert the child to the fact that they are doing something wrong. Some parents claim that the purpose of a smack is not to inflict pain, but to give the child a shock. Well, if this is true, then those parents should be happy to replace the smack with an unpleasant sounding whistle. If it is loud enough it will certainly give the child a shock.

Positive Reinforcement

Whenever we provide a reward for good behavior we are using *positive reinforcement*. Essentially *positive reinforcement* involves the *addition* of some *desired* object or event, which results in the strengthening of a desired

behavior. You see this in action at zoos and wildlife reserves, when the trainer performs a demonstration with an animal. For example, the seal climbs out of the water and balances a ball on his nose, and is rewarded with a nice fresh fish. This is contrary to the systems used in many of the old-style circuses, in which animals were whipped and punished for not performing correctly.

Now, positive reinforcement can be used to shape children's behavior too. It requires a long term commitment and can take longer than techniques involving punishment, however the resulting behavior is more consistent and it makes for a more positive home environment. The reason it takes longer to modify behavior with positive reinforcement is because essentially you have to wait for the desired behavior to occur before you can reward it. Sometimes it can take hours for a desired behavior to emerge, but when it does, it is important to reinforce it with immediately with praise. Some people use food, which is known as a *primary reinforcer*. This can be extremely effective, but in the long term it is best to use praise. If the parent starts with a primary reinforcer such as food, it can be beneficial to associate the food with positive praise. In doing so, the parent is setting praise up as a *secondary reinforcer*. Eventually, after repeated training, the praise will have the same result as the food, and then the parent can phase out the primary reinforcer.

Negative Punishment

An effective technique is the combination of positive reinforcement and *negative punishment*. When we put a child into timeout, or remove a favorite toy, we are applying negative punishment. This is to say, we are removing a desired object or stimulus from the child in order to reduce a behavior. In the case of timeout, we are removing people, television, computer, and other desired objects from the child. Teachers use a mix of positive reinforcement and negative punishment to manage their classroom behavior. Now, if a teacher can manage a class of 30 children with these techniques, then it is

possible for parents to manage the behavior of their children using the same techniques. Sure, these techniques require patience and work because the shaping of behavior is gradual, but the results are worth the effort. Using these techniques creates a positive home environment and it builds greater, more genuine respect from children than the alternatives.

Political Correctness: The conservatives think its gone too far

Arguments against the anti-smacking law usually involve the criticism that our society is too politically correct and that this results in the loss of old fashioned values, which worked well for us in the past. The claim is made that previous generations were allowed to smack their children, and in those days society was generally better. Children respected their elders and crime rates were lower.

It is interesting to note that every generation worries about the next generation and believes that society is not as good now as it was when they were growing up. Perhaps we have a tendency to look on the past with fondness, and we forget about the things that were going wrong in society. Consider some of the negative aspects of the non-PC previous generation. There were no equal rights for women. In fact, sexism was rampant and women were only allowed to work until they became someone's wife. In many countries racism was considered the norm, and there was active segregation between blacks and whites. Teenagers were considered to be children and were not given a say in the way society was run. We had the Second World War, and all the negative effects that followed from that—including blind allegiance to England and the death of many innocent lives. So, it may be misleading to say that society was better in the past.

One of the points often raised in the anti-smacking debate involves the rising crime-rate. Supporters of smacking make a subtle connection between the

anti-smacking legislation and the increase in crime—particularly youth crime. The argument usually implies that because children are not smacked they do not have proper respect for their elders and society. They get away with everything because there is no proper punishment, and the result is a rise in the crime-rate.

There is, of course, a problem with this argument, which people often miss because they are caught up in the emotive nature of the reasoning. The problem is that the people who are committing crimes today were brought up in a world in which smacking was normal. The anti-smacking legislation came in to effect in 2007. Today's criminals were smacked as children. It is therefore faulty reasoning to draw a connection between the rising crime-rates and the anti-smacking law. If we are to be rational, we need to keep the anti-smacking law in place for at least 15 years and *then* look at the crime-rates. It may well be the case that crime-rates drop when a generation of children grow up without ever being exposed to pain as a means of punishment. Perhaps children who are brought up with positive reinforcement will have greater respect for society. We need to do the research to find out, and that means keeping the anti-smacking law in place.

Children vs Parents Rights

Part of the reason the anti-smacking debate arises is because many parents believe that the law infringes on their rights. People believe they have the right to discipline their children in whatever way they see fit. So, if they believe that smacking is the best option, then it should be their right to smack. But there is a problem here. The problem arises because there is more than one person involved in smacking. We also have the child, who, as a human, also has rights. The question is, do children have the right *not* to be smacked? If so, there is a conflict of rights, and we have to question whether a parent's right to smack their child outweighs the child's right not to be smacked.

Now, for many people this issue does not arise. This is because they deny that the child has the right not to be smacked. But there is a problem in denying the child this right. The child is a human being, and should therefore be afforded the same rights as any other human being. All people in our society have the right not to be physically punished, and since children are people, they must have the same right. Supporters of smacking will need to provide good reasons for why children do not have the same rights as adults. They may suggest that there are, in fact, many rights adults have, which do not extend to children. For example, adults have the right to drive cars but we do not give that right to young children. But this type of example does not work. As far as driving goes, adults do not, in fact, have the right to drive cars. They have the right to apply for a driver's license as long as they meet certain criteria (including age), but they do not have the automatic right to drive a car.

Perhaps a better example is the adult right to vote. At this time, people below the age of 18 years do not have the right to vote. The reason for this is that many people under the age of 18 do not have a full understanding of the issues facing society. They therefore, cannot make a rational choice for government*. Law makers had to choose an age, and made the arbitrary decision to give the right to vote to people 18 years of age and over.

Supporters of smacking could suggest that the right not to be smacked only applies to people over the age of, say, 14 years.

The reply to this suggestion would be to state that the right not to be smacked is not analogous to the right to vote. The reason law makers chose a specific age for voting is because they had no other option. They simply couldn't open up voting to all ages because children are not mature enough to make intelligent choices for government. The right not to be smacked would only be analogous to the right to vote if there were no other alternatives to smacking, but as I have described above, there *are* alternatives to smacking. The use of positive reinforcement is one such alternative. So it is misleading to

suggest that the right not to be smacked should only apply to people over a certain age. The right not to be smacked should apply to everyone.

So, do parents have the right to smack children? Well, if it infringes on another person's rights (namely the child's), then the answer has to be "no". Children are human beings and have the same rights as any other human being.

Perhaps the case could be made that people do *not*, in fact, have the right not to be smacked. In this case, smacking would not impact on anyone's rights. But wait! Does this mean that my father could come to my house and smack me if he disagrees with something I do? Could I smack my neighbor if he makes too much noise at night? And could he then smack me because he doesn't like being smacked? If so, I would smack him back because *I* don't like being smacked. Maybe children could smack their parents when they disagree with them.

There are obvious problems with the suggestion that people do not have the right not to be smacked. When we take the idea to its extreme, we find ourselves with a society in which people are smacking each-other whenever they disagree. The absurd result of this would see people smacking each-other in response to being smacked.

The point of this section should be clear. If people have the right not to be smacked, then that right must extend to *all* people—including children. If we take away that right, then we end up with a bizarre situation in which everyone can smack anyone with whom they disagree.

Conclusion

A staggering number of parents believe they have the right to smack their children. They want to be able to smack their children to modify their behavior. I have suggested that all people have the right *not* to be smacked, and

therefore parents are infringing on a person's rights if they smack their child. I have shown that positive punishments, such as smacking, are not the only way to change a child's behavior. Other options involving a mix of positive reinforcement and timeout can be more effective than smacking, and will result in a more positive home environment for the child. If parents insist on using positive punishments, then a loud noise such as a whistle will serve the same purpose as a smack, but without the pain. Smacking is only permissible if there are no other options, and since I have offered other methods to modify a child's behavior, smacking is not permissible.

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* There are many people over 18 years of age who do not understand the issues facing society, and there are many people under 18 years of age who have a full understanding of the issues. Perhaps the right to vote should be extended to younger people on the proviso that they demonstrate their understanding of the process and the policy of politicians.