

The Case against Spanking

Smacking might be an effective way of controlling a young child's behaviour but what do children actually learn when they are treated in this way? Children who are smacked learn the lesson that it is permissible for people to use physical violence to impose their idea of what is right. They might not be able to do this with their parents but they will find opportunities to do it with other children or with other adults when they grow up. It is not surprising that children who are smacked are more likely to use violence when they need to assert themselves in a difficult situation. In fact, 26 separate studies looking at 12,517 children all indicated that there was a clear link between corporal punishment and increased levels of aggression in childhood.

We should also stop and think about the kind of morality we want our children to acquire. Do we really want to teach them that what matters above all else is being obedient, or do we want to encourage them to develop a sensitivity towards and an understanding of other people's feelings? Surely this is a more appealing form of morality.

To raise children who have a morality based more on sensitivity and understanding parents need to maintain a very close and loving relationship with their children in which they can communicate openly. That kind of relationship will certainly be damaged if parents resort to smacking their children. Because corporal punishment inflicts pain it instils fear, and this creates an emotional distance between the parent and child. Children who are afraid of their parents are likely to become less communicative. Not only does this damage the child-parent relationship but it also leaves them less able to deal with their feelings.

Recent research using the latest brain scanning techniques adds to the concern about the consequences of corporal punishment in the home. Professor Margaret Sunderland draws the conclusion from this research that parents who use fear to discipline their children can get quick results but their children pay a very high price. They are often left with increased levels of anxiety and social phobia which can persist for the rest of their lives. She warns parents that "it is all too easy to break a child."

Since there are alternatives there really is no excuse for parents treating their children in this way. In some cases children get into a habit of behaving badly because they learn that that is a way of attracting their parents' attention. This can be avoided if parents spend more time encouraging children when they are behaving well and make sure that children have stimulating things to do. Rewarding positive behaviour is much more effective than punishing negative behaviour. In those moments when young children do get out of control or refuse to listen it is often best to calmly hold them. As Professor Sunderland puts it: "Sometimes a child's brain is too hyper-active to respond to language and a warm and loving touch is the only thing that can calm them down without conflict."