The negative impacts of corporal punishment

A fact sheet to counter claims that corporal punishment does no harm

The Facts

There is a substantial body of research showing the negative effects of corporal punishment on children, with an increasing focus on the negative consequences of the so-called ‘little smacks’. A 2002 study highlighted the many harmful consequences of corporal punishment, and clearly identified that corporal punishment has only one positive outcome, and that this is a short-term benefit of immediate compliance. A growing body of research findings indicate that corporal punishment has a range of adverse neurological, physical, behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social development outcomes.

A 2012 research paper which examined two decades of research into corporal punishment from across the world showed that:

- Numerous studies have found that physical punishment increases the risk of broad and enduring negative developmental outcomes, while no study has found that physical punishment enhances developmental health (present author’s emphasis).
- Most child physical abuse occurs in the context of punishment.
- A professional consensus is emerging that parents should be supported in learning nonviolent, effective approaches to discipline.

The serious physical consequences of corporal punishment can include broken bones, internal injuries, cuts and burns; in the worst cases, they lead to death.

The Myth

“I got hidings as a child; it didn’t do me any harm”.
And
“Using corporal punishment in a measured and loving was does more good than harm if you are an otherwise loving parent”.
And
“There is a big difference between child abuse and corporal punishment used to discipline a child”.

Sonke Gender Justice is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation, established in 2006. Today, Sonke has established a growing presence on the African continent and plays an active role internationally. Sonke works to create the change necessary for men, women, young people and children to enjoy equitable, healthy and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies. Sonke pursues this goal across Southern Africa by using a human rights framework to build the capacity of government, civil society organisations and citizens to achieve gender equality, prevent gender-based violence and reduce the spread of HIV and the impact of AIDS.

MenCare – A Global Fatherhood Campaign – is coordinated by Promundo, Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke) and the MenEngage Alliance, as an effort to promote men’s involvement as fathers and as caregivers. It seeks to provide support materials, messages, policy recommendations and research to encourage local MenEngage partners, NGOs, women’s rights organizations, governments and UN partners to implement campaign activities in their settings.

MenCare is conceived as a complement to global and local efforts to engage men and boys in ending violence against women and girls. Together with efforts like the White Ribbon Campaign, it is part of the MenEngage Alliance’s global vision to achieve equitable, non-violent relationships and caring visions of what it means to be men.

From a MenCare perspective, the prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings, including the home, is integral to efforts to create change of this nature.
Many South African children are harmed in the exercise of discipline in the home; a recent study on child death confirms this. When angry and stressed parents lash out at their children because they believe they have the right to physically punish them, great harm can be done. Childline S.A confirms that many of the cases of child abuse brought to their attention involve corporal punishment that ‘got out of hand’, an assertion supported by findings other countries.

In 2013, the Medical Research Council (MRC) found that 45% of all child homicide was child abuse- and neglect-related, and estimated that 3 children are murdered per day in South Africa.

**Negative behavioural outcomes** linked to corporal punishment include child aggression and antisocial behaviour, as well as increased aggression, criminality and antisocial behaviour in adulthood, and an increased risk of abusing their own child or spouse in adulthood or being the victim of abuse.

**Adverse emotional outcomes**, including a decreased quality of relationship between parent and child, have also been found.

There is clear research evidence that corporal punishment has a negative effect on intelligence and cognitive functioning. For example, children in a West African school that used corporal punishment performed significantly worse in tasks involving “executive functioning” and psychological processes such as planning, abstract thinking, and delaying gratification than those in a school relying on milder disciplinary measures such as time-outs.

Child abuse has been shown to cause permanent damage to the neural structure and function of the developing brain itself.

In early childhood, the brain develops faster than any other organ in the body. This makes early childhood a very sensitive and critical period in brain development. The stresses caused by pain and fear of spanking can negatively affect the development and function of a child’s brain, derailing natural, healthy brain growth and resulting in life-long and irreversible abnormalities. Also, physical punishment can cause alterations in the dopaminergic regions associated with vulnerability to the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

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**References**

7. Gershoff. 2002
8. Gershoff. 2002