

Researching the rod

I feel sorry for parents today, caught up in the kind of culture war recently highlighted in *Triple Helix*.¹ 'Experts' tell them not to smack their children, claiming that it only modifies behaviour in the short-term. Apparently, it may even teach them to be violent. If a child's behaviour must be changed then, they are told, it can be more effectively done by other, non-violent means. The logic of these arguments, based as they are on the social psychology of aggression and the behaviourist theory of reinforcement, seems to be irrefutable.

Yet many parents remember being smacked as children and do not believe it did them any harm. The older generation often advise them to be stricter and to use 'a good smack' if needed. In addition, Christian parents find that the Bible seems to endorse physical punishment, as do some more conservative churches.² Even within the Christian medical fold, there is considerable disagreement over the smacking question.³

So what are parents to do? Nobody wants to be responsible for bringing up violent children. But is sparing the rod actually resulting in non-violent children? Do we in fact simply have a generation of riotous children developing into uncontrollable teenagers?

Conditional smacking research

A recent meta-analysis concluded that smacking is no less effective, and may sometimes be better, than other disciplinary tactics in modifying children's long term behaviour.⁴ It was also concluded that, contrary to the social psychology theory of aggression, smacking does not promote any more, and sometimes promotes less, anti-social violence than other disciplinary techniques.

Importantly, the authors distinguished between different types of smacking. 'Conditional' smacking is non-abusively smacking a child who responds defiantly to milder tactics such as time out. 'Customary' smacking is smacking as it is typically used, based mostly on studies of smacking frequency without specifying how it was used. 'Overly severe' smacking describes the use of excessive force or slapping the face. Finally, 'predominant' smacking is the term used when smacking is the parent's primary disciplinary method.

Conditional smacking reduced anti-social behaviour significantly more than did ten of thirteen alternative disciplinary tactics (such as reasoning, privilege removal, love withdrawal, ignoring and restraint). There was no difference compared to the other three tactics: a brief forced isolation (based on three studies), a combination of non-physical punishment and reasoning (one study) and verbal prohibition (one study).

Most research on conditional smacking has used two to six year old children. Only overly severe and predominant smacking compared unfavourably with other disciplinary responses. It would appear that age-appropriate, conditional smacking to enforce milder disciplinary tactics can form part of an effective package of responses for both the short and long term. When so used, milder

disciplinary tactics become more effective by themselves, rendering smacking less necessary subsequently.

Religious families

My own research into child discipline seems to indicate that religiously active parents have been fairly successful in their child rearing techniques.⁵ People who had been brought up by parents who read the Bible, attended church, prayed and talked about God and faith were no more likely than others to have experienced physical punishment up to the age of twelve; after that they actually reported less physical punishment.

What I found most interesting was that people who had religiously active parents were more likely to say that the physical punishment they experienced was due to a *child oriented* reason; in other words, they were smacked because they had broken a known rule. They were less likely to say that the punishment they received was due to a *parent oriented* reason; that is, out of parental anger, the need to inflict pain or to show who's boss.

Religiously active parents were also less likely to discipline by the withdrawal of affection or approval. Overall, religiously active parents were rated more highly by their children in terms of sensitivity to needs, fairness of discipline, understanding of feelings and the degree of trust the child had in their parent. The essential element appeared to be whether the parent talked about God and faith. I found that these results were the same regardless of whether the child had continued with religious activity.

Where do we go from here?

So what should Christian parents do? It would seem that, if used correctly, smacking can be an effective disciplinary tactic. While nobody is ever perfect, the track record of Christians as parents is on the whole quite impressive. I suspect that this is due, at least in part, to their biblical understanding of who a child is. Every child is created in God's image and is therefore capable of doing good, but is also fallen and so capable of doing evil. Once this is recognised, parents can begin to respond to both good and bad behaviour appropriately.

No parent is ever perfect. However, I believe that the decision as to which disciplinary techniques to use must be left to individual parents, within a legal framework to protect children from abuse.

John Steley is a psychologist at the Mission Practice and InterHealth Worldwide in London

references

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4. Larzelere RE, Kuhn BR. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 2005; 8(1):1-37
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