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Paul Burgess and Rhona Knight debate this timely issue

Should Christian doctors support

'Yes!' Paul Burgess is a GP in Southampton

For a long time we parents have been hoodwinked into believing that smacking can be a useful and even necessary part of child discipline. We have been hoaxed into accepting that the Bible supports such a bogus and empty method of teaching right and wrong.

Coping with defiant, exasperating or dangerous behaviour tests our parenting skills to the limit; we need to be patient, not slip into using methods that are often regretted and will have to be abandoned sooner or later. We can always walk away from potentially confrontational situations. There is no need for short, sharp shocks - learning is a life-long process. Children watch their parents' behaviour acutely and respond best to the positive reinforcement and affirmation they rightly crave.

Smacking as such is not mentioned in the Bible but it can guide us in disciplining children. Some biblical references to corporal punishment are literal;¹ others are usually read as metaphorical.² Proverbs exhort us to seek our Lord's wisdom, knowledge and discipline. The metaphorical rods of discipline and correction are mentioned.³ 'He who spares the rod hates his son'.⁴ Those who believe this rod to be a literal device for physical punishment should note that it is also to be used for foolish adults.⁵ As Christians today do not advocate corporal punishment of adults, we should be consistent and refuse to apply it to children. Violence is a sign of unfaithfulness.⁶ Verbal aggression is a sign of godlessness.⁷ When considered alongside Jesus' example, these rods are almost certainly metaphorical.

Ephesians refers to child discipline: '...obey your parents in the Lord for this is right'.⁸ 'Fathers, do not exasperate your children'.⁹ The Good News translation says, 'Parents, do not treat your children in such a way as to make them angry'. J B Phillips interprets it as, '...don't over-correct'. Similarly,

'Parents don't come down too hard on your children or you'll crush their spirits'.¹⁰

Children under six are too young for smacking to be contemplated. Babies and toddlers are extremely distressed by pain. Terrified and emotionally overloaded, they learn only fear. Small children are physically and mentally vulnerable; we can sometimes forget our adult strength. In the tragic case of Victoria Climbié, the physical abuse that eventually led to her death began as what some would consider normal smacking.¹¹

Children of six and over are rapidly becoming thinking young adults and should be treated as such. They are learning to manage their own behaviour and social skills and their parents' example is paramount. Any physical punishment is humiliating, demeaning, negative and rejecting. It may also result in children smacking their younger siblings, copying their parents' behaviour.

A change in the law is the quickest way to bring about positive and necessary changes in social attitudes. It will need to be accompanied by a huge publicity campaign, as in Sweden. Only then will we be able to look back on the legality of smacking children in the same way as we view defunct laws that permitted husbands to hit their wives, and institutions to use corporal punishment.

Ordinary, loving parents have nothing to fear as minor lapses will not result in prosecution. We can learn the skills necessary to guide and discipline children without smacking, so imitating our Heavenly Father who is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.¹²

References

1. Exodus 21:20, Deuteronomy 25:2, 2 Corinthians 11:25
2. Psalms 23:4, Isaiah 11:4
3. Proverbs 29:15
4. Proverbs 13:24, 22:15, 23:13
5. Proverbs 10:13, 14:3, 19:29, 26:3
6. Proverbs 13:2
7. Proverbs 11:9
8. Ephesians 6:1-3
9. Ephesians 6:4
10. Colossians 3:21 (*The Message*)
11. www.victoria-climbié-inquiry.org.uk
12. Exodus 34:6
13. Ephesians 6:4
14. Proverbs 13:24, 23:13, 29:15
15. Psalms 139: 13-16

Timeline	1860 – legal limit of chastisement laid down	1933 – Children's and Young Person's Act enshrines 'reasonable chastisement'	1979 – Other European countries begin to ban smacking	1986 – Education Act abolishes corporal punishment in state schools	1998 – European Court of Human Rights rules that UK law doesn't adequately protect children from parental assault	1999 – Independent schools abolish corporal punishment	2001 – Victoria Climbié case and inquiry

HEAD

Support a ban on smacking children

'No!' Rhona Knight is a GP in Peterborough

I believe in child-centred discipline based on biblical values, rather than state-dictated discipline based on non evidence-based transient ideologies. The methods of discipline used by parents in the upbringing of their children need to be tailored to the age, stage and nature of the child concerned. And as always, God wants to help us.

We have been given a special task in bringing up our children to be men and women of God.¹³ We are not to exasperate them and we are to desire good for them. This does not preclude physical discipline.¹⁴ Just as our Heavenly Father treats us as unique individuals, so we should treat our children.¹⁵

As parents of three boys, my husband and I have aimed to use positive forms of discipline. Saying, 'Thank-you, that was very generous' to one of our children resulted in him almost glowing with pleasure. A small present for another who had worked especially hard at a difficult area of school work likewise affirmed him. The third likes nothing better than to snuggle during reading or being read to. All three of our children have responded to time as a family. We have used all these forms of positive discipline in many different ways, adapting them to meet the needs of our children at different times. They have all helped in our task of guiding them in the way they should go. First and foremost, *positive discipline* is worth striving for.

We also have used *negative discipline*. The feedback to our son on the lack of violin practice resulted in increased self-motivation. Time out, aided by an egg timer, helped another son calm down and reflect. The withdrawal of computer privileges was a punishment to be feared by all three; loss of a promised treat or pocket money really was next to ineffective! More drastically, the removal of a child from a party for bad behaviour never had to be repeated. We have also smacked our children, although with the youngest now eight this seems a long time ago. We smacked our preschool children, after verbal

warnings, for things we deemed dangerous - like approaching an open fire. It was not long until 'One, Two, Three!' resulted in safe behaviour. As we were able to use a smack, they learned at an early age (when reasoning was not possible due to their still developing linguistic skills) that fires were not to be played with. The other situation in which we would use a smack was extreme naughtiness. With our children this was not biting or hitting others (as some of our friends have had to contend with); it was more often defiance or loss of control. Smacking in these situations makes a point that a certain behaviour is either dangerous or unacceptable. The smack is over quickly, the behaviour stops rapidly and, depending on the age of the child, a cuddle plus/minus a discussion can follow. In either case, relationships are renewed.

As a GP and mum, I have witnessed many forms of parental discipline. Effective parents seem able to be flexible in their approach to discipline. *Positive discipline*, whether it be star charts, special treats, affirmation or a cuddle, is always preferred to *negative discipline*. However, *negative discipline*, including smacking, also has a place – the right place at the right time for the right child. I recall a friend who had twins, one of whom loved running away, whether onto a road, into a shop or out of the open front door. When my friend was not up to being the perfect parent and allowed one of these escapes to occur, how should she have reacted? I believe her smacks to have been appropriate. Knowing that particular child at that stage of his life, only a strait jacket would have worked any better!

A ban on smacking will prevent responsible parents from having the flexibility needed to discipline their children. I believe that a state-dictated ban on smacking will result in our children being exposed to more physical and emotional danger. Instead, as Christians, we need to empower parents to use child-centred discipline, to meet their children's individual needs. Each one is special and unique.

Information

- Children's Rights Alliance for England - www.crae.org.uk
- Children and Young People's Unit - www.cypu.gov.uk
- 4 Nations Child Policy Network - www.childpolicy.org.uk
- UN Committee on The Rights of The Child - www.unhcr.ch
- Families First - www.familiesfirst.org
- www.childrenareunbeatable.org.uk
- www.endcorporalpunishment.org

What position do you take? Is there a particular issue that you would like featured in Head to Head?

Write in to rachael.pickering@cmf.org.uk and join in the debate. In the next issue, we will publish correspondence along with the next Head to Head.

2002 – UK urged to embrace UN Convention on The Rights of the Child

2003 – NSPCC report that smacking laws abroad have not led to prosecution of parents for minor incidents

2004 July – The Children's Bill in the Lords – a complete ban rejected in favour of Lord Lester's compromise amendment, which removes the 'reasonable chastisement' defence but permits mild smacking

2004 October – At report stage in the Commons, the compromise position is supported