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EXPERT COMMENT: Research shows smacking makes children more aggressive and at risk of mental health problems

Raymond Arthur, Professor of Law at Northumbria University, explores research around parents or carers smacking their children.

It might be seen by some as one of the ultimate parenting taboos – to admit that you smack your child. Yet research from the Children’s Society reveals just 14% of adults think slapping children is unacceptable. It’s clear then that a lot of parents still see the odd smack as an acceptable form of punishment – for when all other methods of discipline have failed.

Many parents rationalise this type of punishment with the fact they too were smacked as a child and claim it didn’t do them any harm. But did it?

Recently, researchers in the US examined over 50 years’ of research involving more than 160,000 children and concluded that smacking children does in fact cause more harm than good. The researchers found smacking often “does the opposite” of what parents want and rarely results in increased immediate compliance by children. It was also shown that children who are smacked are more likely to exhibit higher levels of aggression and mental health problems as they grow up.

Smacking and the law

It is legal for a parent or carer to smack their own child in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as a form of “reasonable punishment”. This is despite the fact that current laws prohibit adults from smacking, pushing or shoving other adults – and also protect pets from violence.

Under the Children Act 2004, parents can smack their children provided it does not cause bruising, scratching or reddening of the skin. In this sense, the law limits the use of physical punishment, but it also sends out a dangerous message that it is legally acceptable to assault a child.

This is at odds with many of our European neighbours – 24 European countries have abolished parents' right to use any form of physical punishment. And yet unlike Austria, Croatia, Denmark or Norway, in the UK parents can still smack or hit as a form of punishment.

Police, lawyers and prosecutors have the difficult task of deciding when hitting is hurting a child – both physically and mentally. The visibility of bruising is often used as a test of whether a smack has been too hard. But this is ineffective as different children have different colour skin and bruise in different ways. The current law also leaves things vague for parents, and makes it hard for them to know what degree of force (if any) it is okay to use.

Lasting consequences

An outright ban on physical punishment across the whole of the UK would be much easier to police. And it would also be consistent with the country's obligations under international law that children must be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence.

Technically, the fact that children can still be punished using physical and mental violence is in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is something the United Nations has urged the UK government to change – instead encouraging and promoting positive, participatory and nonviolent forms of discipline and respect for a child's equal right to human dignity and physical integrity.

Although at the time smacking can seem like a quick fix, it is clear it has long-lasting consequences. As the latest research shows, discipline involving the infliction of violence can be damaging to a child – both physically and emotionally. It is clear then that the legal acceptance of beating children must end, thereby putting the child in exactly the same position as adults and pets in respect of the law.

Ultimately, a ban on smacking would not only provide children with greater protection, but it would also let parents know clearly what is and isn't acceptable when it comes to disciplining a child. But beyond all this, it would

also help children to grow up happier and healthier – and what can possibly be more important than that?

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