

Smacking – beneficial or harmful?

Dr Philip Wescombe is a concerned father of three boys, a Microbiologist by trade and stood as a candidate in Dunedin South for the Kiwi Party at the 2008 general election.

With the referendum looming there has been increasing scrutiny of the wording “Should a smack as part of good parental discipline be a criminal offence in New Zealand?” Many commentators have derided the “good parental discipline” component, saying they don’t believe good parents smack their children. I would challenge these commentators to come up with the scientific research to back up their opinions. As will be outlined below, there is considerable solid evidence in the scientific literature that supports the use of spanking/smacking as a useful and beneficial tool for loving parents who raise healthy, well adjusted children.

Obviously, in order to accurately evaluate the efficacy of disciplinary spanking, it must be investigated apart from the broader category of physical punishment (ie. it must not lump physical abuse and disciplinary spanking together). However, failure to do this has resulted in the majority of research reporting inaccurate conclusions, which has led to confusion and inappropriate generalizations. One example of this was highlighted by the systematic review (by Lyons, Anderson and Larson) of anti-smacking literature published between 1984 and 1993. They found that 83% of the 132 articles were editorials or commentaries devoid of empirical data. Of those articles that contained empirical data, all but one was flawed by combining severe physical abuse with disciplinary spanking. Interestingly, the one remaining study revealed no detrimental effects of disciplinary spanking on the child. There are many other factors that also serve to undermine the anti-smacking literature which are well reviewed in a document produced in 2007 by the American College of Pediatricians entitled: Discipline of the Child; Corporal Punishment: A Scientific Review of its Use in Discipline (available online at: http://www.nkmr.org/english/CPPolicy_final.pdf).

While it is necessary to demonstrate flaws in the research that has been used to support an anti-smacking stance, it is more useful to highlight some of the research that demonstrates the use of smacking to be of equal or greater benefit in child-rearing outcomes when compared to forms of non-physical discipline.

1) A symposium of experts on child development were given the goal of developing “consensus statements regarding the scientific evidence on the long and short term effects of corporal punishment on children”. The findings included: a) the strongest studies do not support a definite link between spanking and later violent behavior; b) the strongest studies do not indicate spanking to be detrimental to a child; c) spanking should not be the primary or only response used by a parent; d) limited data indicates spanking in a controlled setting is effective over the short term (supplement to Pediatrics, 1996; 4:803-860).

2) In the same supplement, a systematic review by Robert Larzelere found stronger evidence of beneficial rather than detrimental effects of disciplinary spanking by parents with preschool children of ages 2 to 6 years. In particular, none of the 35 most reliable studies identified a single alternative form of discipline that had superior outcomes for the child compared to non-abusive spanking of children under the age of 13. Perhaps most telling was a response to this review by Baumrind which stated “As Dr. Larzelere’s review of quality studies documents, a blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking by parents is not scientifically supportable.”

3) A 2005 meta-analysis of a quarter-century of literature by Larzelere and Kuhn (Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 2005; 8:1-37) compared the physical punishment of children with other disciplinary measures such as time-out, reasoning, privilege removal, physical restraint and scolding. Physical punishment was divided into four categories: *conditional* spanking (used under limited conditions); *customary* physical punishment (typical manner of use by ordinary parents); *overly severe* punishment; and *predominant* physical punishment (used almost exclusively). Some of the findings from this study were: a) Conditional spanking was associated with better child outcomes than 10 of the 13 alternative disciplinary tactics, with equal outcomes to the other three; b) Conditional spanking and customary physical punishment were never associated with worse outcomes than any other alternative tactic; c) in general, results favoured conditional spanking over non-physical punishments for reducing defiance and antisocial behavior; d) no evidence was found that physical punishment was more strongly associated with physical aggression in children than other disciplinary tactics.

4) Another systematic review by Robert Larzelere in 2000, examined the outcomes for children in families where parents used non-abusive customary physical punishment. One finding was that spanking has consistently beneficial outcomes when it is nonabusive and used primarily to back up milder disciplinary tactics with 2- to 6-year olds by loving parents (Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 2000; 3:199-221).

5) There are only a few published research studies in the literature that meet the rigorous requirements for evidence-based medical practice. These studies all focused on determining which procedure was most effective in controlling a child’s escape from time-out. In all studies a mild spanking (or equivalent definition) was found to be the most feasible back-up for the child leaving the time-out chair (for an example see: Roberts and Powers, Behavioral therapy, 1990; 21:257-271)

The few selected scientific articles summarized above, will hopefully serve as a starting point for those who wish to make an informed decision in the upcoming referendum.