



The downsides of corporal punishment and the advantages of positive discipline in parenting

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Abstract :Corporal punishment against children entails violations of multiple children's rights, and its negative effects on children's well-being need to be addressed. Simultaneously, alternative methods of parenting, such as positive disciplining, should be put in practice more.

In the family, a child builds their moral character, learns basic social values and ideals, meets the need for love, belonging and closeness, and creates an idea of herself/himself and others. Family also represents the place where a child, for the very first time, encounters parental discipline, which is crucial for the development of her/his personality and bio-psycho-social maturity. Therefore, parenting children is the most important, but also the most difficult task for every parent. Until recently it was considered that 'a sturdy hand resolves everything', but in contemporary global society, such a disciplinary method is being [questioned](#) and [re-evaluated](#) more and more by both the professional and the general public. Corporal punishment involves the use of physical force in order to

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suppress a child's undesirable behaviour and to build parental authority. However, the recent literature and scientific studies on the topic increasingly point out the harmful consequences that corporal punishment may inflict on the physical and mental health of children.

Corporal punishment: its extent and consequences

In [General Comment No. 8](#) (2006) the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child defines corporal punishment as:

any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however, light. Most of them involve hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children, with the hand or with an implement - a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. (para 11)

[Murray Straus](#), a sociology professor at the University of New Hampshire, who worked on the topic of corporal punishment of children, adds that the intention of physical force is to cause bodily pain, but not injury, and that its main purpose is a correction or control of the child's behaviour. Aside from physical injuries, the child endures emotional injuries as well. Therefore, physical force is always an act of inflicting harm that no child deserves to experience.

In this regard, a [study](#) carried out in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and New Zealand came to the same conclusion, emphasising that the majority of children pointed out that a smack 'made them cry and feel scared, sad, unhappy, unloved, heartbroken or awful'.

Therefore, the use of physical force always has negative consequences, and, no matter what, it results in a form of injury –whether physical, psychological or most often, both – which no child deserves to experience. Moreover, back in 1994 authors [Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman](#) had made a typology of child victimisation in which they included corporal punishment.

Furthermore, in a [study](#) involving a sample of 108 mothers, two-thirds of the mothers changed their own disciplinary actions as a result of their child's reaction to being spanked because they saw how upset their children were or because they realised that they had been using violence in an attempt to correct their child's behaviour.

Globally, many [countries](#) have introduced in their legislative frameworks a prohibition on parents from applying any form of physical disciplinary punishment to children. This is still not enough when we consider that worldwide more than 65 percent of all children aged 2 to 14 experience physical punishment on a [regular basis](#). These percentages are cause for concern, especially because in reality the percentages of parental corporal punishment are certainly much higher than studies can show.

Several studies have shown that parents value the opinions of experts such as medical workers, social workers and psychologists most when it comes to the use of corporal punishment..However, what is alarming is that the [study](#) carried

out among paediatrics in the USA showed that almost half of the parents believe that corporal punishment is an effective method of discipline, while 42 percent conditionally recommend the use of physical punishment.

Meanwhile, another [study](#) points out that, among 153 paediatricians, less than half of them are acquainted with the effects that corporal punishment has on the physical health of the child. When it comes to knowledge about psychological consequences, the amount of them is 59.5 percent. Only 47 percent of paediatricians have advisory conversations where they counsel parents regarding the difficulties they have when disciplining their children. At this point, we can conclude that there is a great need to raise awareness not only among parents but also among professional workers.

Proponents of introducing a ban on corporal punishment state negative consequences associated with it, and in support of that argument, they point out ten of the eleven meta-analyses [show](#) that parental corporal punishment is linked to:

decreased moral internalisation, increased child aggression, increased child delinquent and antisocial behaviour, decreased quality of the relationship between parent and child, decreased child mental health, increased risk of being a victim of physical abuse, increased adult aggression, increased adult criminal and antisocial behaviour, decreased adult mental health and increased risk of abusing own child or spouse. Corporal punishment was associated with only one desirable behaviour, namely, increased immediate compliance.

Alternatives to corporal punishment of children

Apart from the use of corporal punishment, which is frequently mistaken for a synonym of discipline, other methods are available to parents whose goal is also to correct the child's behaviour without the child having to go through physical pain and [negative emotions](#).

In scientific studies and [literature](#) related to disciplining children and parental educational actions, we can find that the term '[positive discipline](#)' is mentioned increasingly. The Council of Europe defines [positive parenting](#) as being based on the best interests of the child and the respect for the rights of the child because it provides nurturing, and guidance, but also sets necessary boundaries.

Hence, [positive parental discipline](#) refers to:

praising children for desirable behaviour; providing clear guidelines, suggestions, advice, and instructions for achieving prosocial goals and behaviours; using positive incentives to increase children's motivation to perform assigned tasks; providing suggestions and choices instead of commands that should control the child; responding favourably to the child's self-initiated behaviours.

The results of the [study](#) in which a group of parents was attending a free 7-week workshop on positive discipline demonstrated that participation in the workshop was related to a decrease in authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, as well as in parental stress. Moreover, the findings indicate positive effects that the workshop had on children whose parents were attending it, whereby a decrease in externalising hyperactive behaviour was noted, as well as an improved scholarly competence.

An example of a positive discipline strategy that parents can implement is [positive time-in](#). It is similar to a time-out in the part in which children manifest an undesirable behaviour, they get excluded from any further activity. The difference from time-out is that the goal of the time-in parenting method is not a punishment, but a reinforcement. The reason behind it is that exclusion from activities or the sending them to their room only makes children feel embarrassment and guilt. Time-in gives children an opportunity to find their own safe space in which they can calm down on their own and in a way that suits their nature and personality. In this manner, children learn how to control their behaviour when they are upset.

Looking ahead

Children's rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)) are focused on the protection and well-being of children as a particularly vulnerable group in society. Corporal punishment entails violations of multiple children's rights, including the rights to respect for their human dignity, physical and psychological integrity, safety and optimal development under the CRC. Protection from corporal punishment is a fundamental right of every child. Based on all the aforementioned considerations, there is a need for more scientific research that would indicate the harmful consequences of corporal punishment and raise deeper awareness of parents on the issue of positive discipline.

Whatever method of parental discipline parents choose, it is necessary for parents to provide their children with warmth, security and love, sending a message to the child that he is loved and deserves to find her/his own place in the world.

These desirable approaches can contribute to promote further and enforce particularly the children's right to be protected from all forms of abuse, violence, punishment and neglect under [Article 19](#) of the CRC.