

CANADIAN  
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SOCIÉTÉ  
CANADIENNE  
DE PSYCHOLOGIE

## **Board of the Canadian Psychological Association**

### **Policy Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth**

#### **Submitted By the Executive of the Section on Clinical Psychology**

#### **Public Statement**

The CPA Board, at its meeting of March 13-14, 2004, agreed to a proposal from the Section on Clinical Psychology that CPA adopt a policy statement on physical punishment of children and adolescents.

*Physical punishment has been consistently demonstrated to be an ineffective and potentially harmful method of managing children's behaviour. It places children at risk of physical injury and may interfere with psychological adjustment, socialization, moral internalization, non-violence and positive adult-child relationships. Its use is a violation of children's rights to physical integrity and dignity.*

*In order to reduce the prevalence of physical punishment of children and youth, three broad national initiatives must be undertaken. First public awareness campaigns must deliver a clear messages consistently and persistently that hurting children as punishment is unacceptable and places them at risk of physical and psychological harm. Second public education strategies must be launched to increase Canadians' knowledge of child development and existing programs supported. Third the Criminal Code of Canada must provide the same protection to children from physical assault as it gives to adults; and the Government of Canada must meet its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.*

This is a modification of a policy statement by CPA in 2003.

#### **Relevance of the Issue to Psychology as a Science and as a Profession**

The recent decision by the Supreme Court of Canada on Section 43 of the Criminal Code (Department of Justice, 2004) has once again focused media attention on the issue of physical punishment of children. Reaction in newspapers and on-line media highlight the importance of the issue for Canadian parents. Surveys indicate that a large proportion of North American parents occasionally use physical force as a means of disciplining their children. Pro-spanking commentators have equated an anti-spanking

position as representing permissive parenting in which no limits are set for children and youth. Advocates of banning spanking note that the use of physical punishment increases the risk of child abuse.

Psychology is the pre-eminent discipline in the empirical study of parenting. Psychological research has established that effective parenting involves two dimensions: warmth and structure. Through both laboratory and field studies, a large body of research has identified efficacious strategies to provide structure. Psychological research has also identified dysfunctional parent-child interactions that lay the foundation for the development of behaviour problems.

Psychologists are key mental health professionals in the delivery of services to children suffering from behaviour problems. Building on a sound research foundation, psychologists have developed effective intervention programs to assist parents in establishing interactions that facilitate the development of appropriate behaviour.

Researchers in both developmental and clinical psychology have established the benefits of positive parenting practices. Professional psychologists working in school and clinical settings have demonstrated the effectiveness of parent education and parent training in the prevention and remediation of child behaviour problems. It is clear that as a science-based profession, Psychology is well placed to make authoritative statements about parenting.

The American Psychological Association has taken a clear stand on physical punishment. A policy statement opposing the use of corporal punishment was issued in 1975. In a *Public Interest Initiative* entitled *Raising children to resist violence: What you can do*, parents are exhorted to provide love, to supervise children, to model good behaviour, to prevent access to guns, and are told explicitly ***Don't hit your children*** (<http://www.apa.org/pi/pii/raisingchildren.html>)

The Canadian Paediatric Association has also issued a position statement on *Effective discipline for children* that directs physicians to *strongly discourage the use of spanking* (Canadian Paediatric Society, January, 2004).

In the summer of 2003, following consultation with the Clinical Section and the Developmental Section, the Canadian Psychological Association endorsed the Joint Statement on Physical Punishment compiled by the Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children on Youth. A Public Statement on *Alternatives to Physical Punishment of Children and Youth* would be consistent with the endorsement of the Joint Statement on Physical Punishment. A Public Statement would promote knowledge in this area and would contribute to the protection of children and the well-being of families. The availability of such a Public Statement on the website of the Canadian Psychological Association reflects a commitment to promoting evidence-based parenting.

## Relevance and Consistency with Ethical Principles

### Principle I: Respect for the Dignity of Persons

#### Values Statement

*..., psychologists acknowledge that all persons have a right to have their innate worth as human beings appreciated and that this worth is not dependent upon their culture, nationality, ethnicity, colour, race, religion, sex, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities, age, socio-economic status, or any other preference or personal characteristic, condition, or status.*

It is clearly consistent with Principle I to promote parenting practices that reflect respect for the dignity of persons. Our ethical code highlights that the dignity of persons should be promoted regardless of age.

*Although psychologists have a responsibility to respect the dignity of all persons with whom they come in contact in their role as psychologists, the nature of their contract with society demands that their greatest responsibility be to those persons in the most vulnerable position.*

Furthermore, our ethical code underlines our particular responsibilities towards those who are most vulnerable, including children.

### Principle IV: Responsibility to Society

#### Values Statement

*A basic ethical expectation of any discipline is that its activities will benefit members of society or, at least, do no harm. Therefore, psychologists demonstrate an active concern for the welfare of any individual, family, group, or community with whom they relate in their role as psychologists. This concern includes both those directly involved and those indirectly involved in their activities. However, as with Principle I, psychologists' greatest responsibility is to protect the welfare of those in the most vulnerable position.*

It is clear that Psychology has contributed to the development of knowledge in effective parenting and to psychological interventions that promote effective parenting. It is therefore consistent with our ethical code that we take steps to disseminate this knowledge that has the potential to benefit a vulnerable segment of society.

*psychologists will do whatever they can to ensure that psychological knowledge, when used in the development of social structures and policies, will be used for beneficial purposes, and that the discipline's own structures and policies will support those beneficial purposes.*

The approval of a Public Statement on physical punishment is likely to be beneficial to children and families.

## **Summary of Relevant Research**

### *Legal Status of Physical Punishment*

Although some countries have banned the use of physical punishment, in both Canada and the United States parents are permitted to punish their children physically, as long as they do not inflict physical harm. The recent decision by the Supreme Court of Canada (January 2004) placed further restrictions on the use of physical punishment, setting age limits, banning the use of objects, and indicating that parents should not punish children in anger.

### *Frequency of Use of Physical Punishment*

In a Gallup survey in the US, Straus and Stewart (1999) found that 74% of parents with children under 17 use spanking as a discipline technique. The proportion of parents who view physical punishment as effective has been declining over recent years, so that for many parents, it is now considered a last resort or a strategy that will only be employed in an extreme situation. The fact that such high numbers of parents report using physical punishment, even though they see it as a last resort and are uncomfortable with it is a compelling case for the need for parent education on alternatives to physical punishment.

The argument that widespread engagement in an activity is an indication it should not be banned has been introduced as an obstacle to many public health initiatives. However, despite initial objections to seat-belt laws, by-laws requiring the use of bicycle helmets, and restrictions in smoking in public places, public education campaigns have been effective in ensuring widespread adoption of these practices.

### *Overview of Research on Physical Punishment*

The effects of physical punishment on children have been the focus of many studies. Research in this area is notoriously difficult to conduct. First, ethical issues preclude random assignment to groups, so that groups that differ in terms of using or not using physical punishment also differ in terms of other variables that are highly salient to child adjustment such as socio-economic status, race, and parental psychopathology (Belsky, 1993; Parke, 2002). Second research in this area relies on self-report. This means that our knowledge of the extent of the use of physical punishment is based on parents' accounts of the behaviours in which they engage. Psychologists are familiar with the effects of social desirability on reports..

Larzelere (2000) reviewed 38 studies of nonabusive and customary spanking pre-adolescent children. He found beneficial effects in terms of reduced noncompliance in

clinical studies of children aged 2-6. In five out of 8 longitudinal studies that controlled for the effects of initial child misbehaviour, physical punishment had detrimental effects on child adjustment.

In a meta-analysis of 88 studies on corporal punishment Gershoff (2002) concluded that spanking frequency is positively related to aggression, misconduct, and related constructs. Holden (2002) highlighted the lack of evidence positive effects of physical punishment. Critics noted that Gershoff included in her meta-analysis under the umbrella of corporal punishment studies that included extreme abuse, thus attributing to all physical punishment negative effects that may only be attributable to severe abuse (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan, 2002).

In the debate around spanking there is controversy as to whether the burden of proof should rest with advocates, (i.e., that if spanking is to be condoned, there must be evidence that it is beneficial), or with critics (i.e., that if spanking is to be banned, there must be evidence that it is harmful). Another controversial issue relates to whether short or long-term outcomes should be evaluated. Critics of physical punishment consider that the use of force to ensure compliance in children lays the foundation for the use of force to resolve any kind of dispute (e.g., Hyman, 1995).

Benjet and Kazdin (2003) distinguished between three positions with respect to spanking: 1) violence begets violence—this is essentially a moral position that is backed up by research that includes abusive behaviour in the definition of physical punishment; 2) mild or occasional spanking may not be harmful under some conditions—this position examines the context of spanking, taking into account parenting context and race; this position does not lead to blanket condemnation but to guidelines of ways to ensure physical punishment is used in a non-abusive way; it notes that occasional physical punishment delivered in a non-impulsive way may not have harmful effects; 3) the view that to spare the rod is to spoil the child—this is a moral position that is not supported by research. Gershoff's review is consistent with the position that violence begets violence whereas Larzelere's is consistent with the view that mild or occasional spanking may not be harmful. Each reviewer's position with respect to spanking guided the criteria by which studies were selected for the review. Larzelere restricted his review to nonabusive spanking, whereas Gershoff included a range of physical punishments including both mild and abusive behaviours.

Benjet and Kazdin identified points of convergence across the two reviews: a) immediate compliance follows corporal punishment; b) age moderates the effects of spanking; and c) frequent punishment is associated with negative outcomes. Benjet and Kazdin recommended that efforts should focus on promoting positive parenting as an alternative to spanking.

## **Financial Consequences**

The adoption of the policy statement does not entail any financial consequences, beyond the expense of putting such a statement on the website of the Canadian Psychological Association and including an announcement in *Psynopsis*.

If the Canadian Psychological Association were to publicize the establishment of policy statement by preparing a press release, this would require allocation of staff time to the endeavour. If the Canadian Psychological Association decided to promote this issue by the preparation of leaflets or the mounting of an education campaign, the cost of such initiatives would depend on their scope.

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