

## **Beyond 'Anti-Smacking': Challenging parental violence**

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### **In**

Phillips B, Alderson P 2003 Beyond 'anti-smacking': challenging parental violence. *Child Abuse Review*, 12:282-291

This paper records Ben Phillips's own views, not necessarily those of the Children's Society.

### **Abstract**

The anti-smacking lobby concentrates on persuading parents not to smack, and the government to prohibit smacking by law. There is much evidence that smacking children is unnecessary and dangerous, and yet smacking continues to be widely practised and accepted in Britain. Our literature review found two underlying reasons for this contradiction: beliefs that children are pre-human beings rather than real human beings, and support for 'parents rights' over children's human rights. We suggest that the anti-smacking lobby's important work will have limited effect until it tackles these two issues.

For a more detailed and referenced version on this paper see Phillips B, Alderson P (forthcoming) Beyond 'anti-smacking': challenging parental violence and coercion in parent-child relations in etc.

### **Introduction**

The view that smacking children is unnecessary and dangerous is supported by research and most expert opinion. Few people now admit to being 'pro-smackers'. Nevertheless, most UK adults oppose giving children the same legal protection from being hit that adults have. Underlying contradictions in anti-smacking debates will have to be resolved, if these majority views are to change and parental violence is to be reduced.

To assert their respect for 'traditional family values' and 'parental rights' might seem the best way for the anti-smacking lobby to win supporters. But efforts to protect women from domestic violence only became effective when men's power, and women's rights - to physical integrity, to tell their stories, and to choose to leave a violent home - were radically reconsidered. Similarly, children are unlikely to be able to escape from parental violence until their views and rights are respected. Children's views on smacking are only exceptionally heard (Willow and Hyder 1998), and very rarely in the anti-smacking literature. This paper reviews differing views of children as human beings or merely beings, and the links of these views to violence or negotiation, to views about parents' and children's rights, and to contrasting ways in which violence to women and to children have been addressed.

### **Human beings ... or human beings?**

Traditional views that children are helplessly dependent, unreasonable and selfish are now being challenged. New research methods are finding how competent, reasonable and altruistic young children can be (Mayall 1994; Alderson 2000). Many children in the poorer Majority World earn their own living and support their families (Ennew 2000). New evidence challenges older research theories, methods and findings, which assumed that babies began at zero and adulthood was the perfect end point. Adults are no longer assumed always to be wise, informed and reasonable, so that greater equality between children and adults is accepted. We are all real people, both being and becoming.

Many parents find they can avoid coercion when they engage in sensitive mutually respectful and rewarding relationships with their babies from birth. And yet older disrespectful views still dominate best selling 'parenting manuals', such as the phrase 'terrible twos', which implies young children are never reasonable and that adults always are. For example, 'Young children nearly always have tantrums out of frustration or because they are pitting their wits against that of others... an effective technique is to leave the room' (Stoppard 1995 in McLarnon 2001: 8).

Even the anti-smacking literature can be negative: 'We all know how maddening it can be to try to finish a chore against a child's whinging' (EPOCH 1989: 5). A leaflet that advises 'respect your child as you would another adult' also advises: 'Give them their say, listen to them, respect their point of view, but don't let them bore or blackmail you into giving in against your better judgement' (NSPCC 2000). A leaflet on discouraging men from hitting their partners would never use such language about women. Yet surely children's advocates should challenge oppressive stereotypes not reinforce them. But adulthood is identified with being wise and good, thus implying that childhood is 'bad'. 'Remember you're the grown up. Your children are your apprentices in learning how to behave: show and tell them how it's done' (EPOCH [undated]). Sometimes children are misleadingly portrayed as unable to learn: 'two-year-olds cannot be "good" or "naughty" on purpose because they do not yet know right from wrong or understand what makes the difference' (EPOCH 1989: 8). There is emphasis on non-negotiable control, 'zero-tolerance', setting and insisting on 'boundaries'. 'Once you've said "no", stick to it' (EPOCH 1990). Even if you are wrong?

A parenting video (accompanying Save the Children 2000a) shows examples of 'good' child care, such as staff insisting that every child eats all the standard food portions served in the nursery, regardless of children's very varied appetites, and as if all adults' wishes must be enforced. It seems to aim to 'sell' anti-smacking methods by promising even greater child-compliance and adult-dominance by using methods other than smacking. Non-smacking parents 'care just as much as everyone else about their children's behaviour. In fact a lot of them are rather strict parents who set clear limits [by using force]... Use your superior size and strength to diffuse situations rather than to hurt...If your child is being silly...and refusing to take you seriously...grasp the child firmly by the upper arms so s/he cannot avoid looking at you and then talk. If the "conversation" starts out with a yell, well, that's a lot better than a blow' (EPOCH 1989: 2, 14-15).

Anti-smacking guides do not give children's views on family life, punishment, power, kindness or communication. Parents are encouraged to listen to adult 'experts', not to children. Yet violence against women was challenged mainly by women and men working together, and taking women's views seriously relying on the reasoned negotiation which violence denies. Physical punishment 'reflects a domineering, non-communicative attitude towards the child, one which disregards the child's opinions and views, leaves the child outside the realm of understanding and logic' (Vice-Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Karp 1999: 3). '[The child] is described as the 'silent sufferer of victimisation' but rarely allowed to speak about her own actions as opposed to the acts committed against her. [Children's] struggles to resist and endure abuse remain largely uncharted and unheard' (Kitzinger 1990: 162). Programmes to challenge violence against children will only be effective when they involve children, especially those who have been hit, to find out how to help them cope with, challenge and, if necessary, escape from violence. This involves adults respectfully sharing real power with children in basing an anti-smacking agenda on children's views of their needs.

Even if smacking is largely eliminated (and a legal ban alone is unlikely to achieve this), violence will continue through adults' power to define children's protests as "illness" and "disorder" (Coppock 2002: 140). Other controls, such as Ritalin, and punishments are liable to be used: 'the most satisfactory and desirable way of resolving most conflict situations ... [is] keeping the child in, sending the child to his or her room, or stopping the child doing something that he or she likes' (DoH 2000: 4). Satisfactory for whom? Children are unlikely to want to replace smacking with other punishments, just as adults would not want to be punished for their minor faults and mistakes. Smacking will be replaced with respect, instead of other coercion, when children are respected as reflective human beings and not simply seen as adults' projects.

### **Parents rights ... or human rights?**

English law in the *Gillick* judgement asserts that parental rights exist only in so far as they benefit children. This challenges the whole concept of 'rights' over children, especially coercive 'rights'. The anti-smacking lobby however risks supporting parents' rights in ways that 'deny children access to knowledge and power' and this 'hence increases their vulnerability' (Kitzinger 1990: 161). The mass media tend to endorse parents having unlimited power, and the Government wants to avoid being seen as 'the nanny state restricting the rights of parents' (Health Minister John Hutton, *Independent* 19.01.00). So ministers decided to 'avoid heavy-handed intrusion into family life' (DoH 2000: 4).

Some feminists argue that 'We must include [challenging] the oppression of children in any programme for feminist revolution or we will be subject to the same failing of which we have so often accused men' (Firestone 1972: 101-2 in Oakley 1994: 31). Yet, the anti-smacking lobby tends to bypass rather than question parents' power within families, despite working with and for children to promote their rights in many public arenas and services outside the home (Willow 1997). International NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) used to take this approach by promoting women's rights through 'inclusion in public projects', but little changed until they helped women to gain more respect at home as well. Similarly, 'if the principles and

standards of the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] are to have reality for all aspects of children's lives ... the debate must extend into the family' (Lansdown 1995: 9). Of course, many children live in loving respectful families, showing that this is possible, but 'most violence to children is perpetrated' at home (Karp 1999: 7). This occurs on far too serious and massive a scale to be explained in terms of a few 'bad' parents. Instead, we must look at the systems, which support such widespread violence against children. Yet, apart from proposing the ban on smacking, the anti-smacking lobby seldom questions whether adults should have so much power over children, and sometimes supports it, such as by advising how to 'produce' the most 'well-disciplined' children (Barnardo's 1997: 5). 'What are "good" children? Perhaps children who...can adjust their behaviour to our moods; don't let us down in public' (EPOCH 1990).

Some pamphlets do suggest that 'sometimes naughtiness and disobedience is a healthy sign!' (NSPCC 2000), and that 'if a child persistently misbehaves, we need to look at deeper causes' (Save the Children 2000: 18- 19). The more positive publications imply that family relations should be about members all co-operating *with each other*, yet they return ultimately to discussing 'ways to develop *children's* co-operation' (Save the Children 2000: 1, our emphasis). Occasionally pamphlets acknowledge that: 'Children who have been brought up to obey adults automatically, even when it feels wrong, are at a disadvantage when faced with inappropriate advances from strangers', (CRO 1999: 50-1) or from their parents who are far more likely to hurt them. The children's rights movement worries about being labelled 'subversive'. Yet 'what change can be made to children's position within society *without* subverting existing hierarchies, without challenging "society as we know it"?' (Kitzinger 1990: 172)

### **Comparing domestic violence with child abuse**

Anti-smacking advocates call for legal safeguards so that 'hitting your child would no longer be more defensible than hitting your wife or neighbour' (Barnardo's 1997: 10), but with important differences. They want 'an assurance of effective child protection [only] in the *few* cases where it is needed' and that would merely '*technically*' criminalise all smacking (CaU 1998, our emphasis). 'Nobody wants to sniff out and criminalise parents who smack. That's the last thing children want, after all.' (Barnardo's 1997: 10). Yet would a modern pamphlet, *Why speak out against wife beating?*, state: 'Nobody wants to sniff out and criminalise violent husbands – that's the last thing their wives would want'?

Instead, the official line for women is that 'Domestic violence is a crime which the police now deal with as a very serious matter... Their first priority is for your safety and well-being' (Home Office 1994: 3). Children's NGOs reassure the public to expect that very few parents will 'become the subject of police enquiries or prosecutions, and neither would "little smacks" administered to children' (Barnardo's 1997: 10). Yet women's advocates see under-intervention as a hindrance not a reassurance (McCann 1985: 94 in Maynard 1993: 117). An individual children's advocate puts the case more clearly than the NGOs do: 'The law should not exist for the benefit of the parent who loses control. It should be there to protect the countless children who are brutalised on a daily basis. Parents don't need the right to smack their children' (Philippa Walker, *Guardian* 19.01.00). As the Government says of

domestic violence, 'No one deserves to be assaulted, humiliated, or abused, least of all by their partner in a supposedly caring relationship – *there is no excuse*' (Home Office 1994: 2).

Unlike Scandinavian countries, the UK anti-smacking lobby does not campaign to prohibit humiliating treatment by law, because it is not 'visible and definable' (Barnardo's 1997: 4). However, English law bans humiliating treatment by employers, and defines domestic violence to 'include mental and verbal abuse and humiliation. Your partner may not give you any money, constantly criticise you or forbid you to see your friends and family' (Home Office 1994: 1).

Police and legal interventions are very traumatic for children (King and Trowell 1992) – and for adults, but so too is staying in a violent home. It has been agreed that it is better to make the system work for women than to leave them without legal and police protection. 'One of the most significant changes in police attitudes has been towards a "pro-arrest" approach as an effective means of reducing repeat victimisation' (Home Office 1999: 32). Domestic violence is also tackled by increasing women's access to information, whereas the anti-smacking lobby 'campaigns to persuade parents' (Barnardo's 1997: 9), but does little to inform and involve children. Yet women's lives have further been transformed by strengthening of their power and status in the family and in society, their equal rights to family property, equal status as guardians, firmer police support and better rights at divorce. However, versions of such changes for children do not seem to be considered and have even been withdrawn, such as benefits for 16-17 year olds. There is now only one 8-bed refuge for all England's run away children.

### **Conclusions**

To promote respectful non-violent relations between children and parents, the anti-smacking lobby needs to work out contradictions underlying its campaign. This will involve respecting children as real human beings by listening to them seriously, working with them as well as for them guided by their experiences and values. It will also involve rethinking parents' 'rights over children' and children's human rights. Instead of only trying to civilise adult dominance, the lobby needs to begin to question it. From concentrating on how to make a ban on parental violence palatable to adults, the lobby has to see how to make it work for children. Otherwise, children's advocates risk simply treating the symptoms of adult violence and coercion instead of tackling the basic problems and their causes.

The different approach would involve finding ethical ways to break through the current secrecy, in order to research and publicise children's own experiences of parental violence. There are international plans to do this (Newell 2002). Parenting literature needs to be checked for any double standards, when children are referred to in ways that are unacceptable for adults. Far more reports need to be written with and for children - on how to cope with parents. New understanding of young children's 'amazing' capacities (Klaus and Klaus 1998) and of mutually rewarding give-and-take child-adult relationships require much more publicity. Economic, environmental and social pressures that increase parental violence have to be relieved, so that societies become less violent and more child and family friendly. Promoting the UN 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child will help to show how respecting

children's rights, far from undermining love, trust and care within families, can enhance them.

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