

*“Let's reintroduce corporal punishment in the schools - and use it on the teachers.”*

- P. J. O'Rourke (satirist)

*“If we are to reach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with children.”*

- Gandhi

## Use the carrot, not the stick: a view on corporal punishment

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Class management and discipline are the cornerstones of successful teaching delivery, and the need to achieve an effective discipline programme makes debates around method and technique commonplace in the teaching world. A poorly managed class is likely to fall foul of poor discipline and as a result an undisciplined mind cannot function successfully in the role of a student. There are many approaches to achieving class discipline, but the most contentious of all is the use of corporal punishment, an issue which can ignite passionate arguments in both the pro-use and anti-use camps. This essay intends to adopt the standpoint that corporal punishment is an ineffective technique of achieving discipline in the classroom, and undermines the need to respect and develop students as young adults.

In order to offer a viewpoint on corporal punishment, a definition must be sought. The following quotations aim to offer a range of common definitions, first from an academic journal, the second the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the third from notes on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from the United Nations;

*“Corporal punishment refers to intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior. It includes a wide variety of methods such as hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, choking, use of various objects (wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins, or others), painful body postures, use of electric shock, use of excessive exercise drills, or prevention of urine or stool elimination.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“the infliction of physical pain upon a person's body as punishment for a crime or infraction. Corporal punishments include flogging, beating, branding, mutilation, blinding, and the use of the stock and pillory. In a broad sense, the term also denotes the physical disciplining of children in the schools and at home.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment include such practices as corporal punishment. . .”<sup>3</sup>*

The common theme behind these definitions is that corporal punishment involves intentionally causing physical pain as a punishment and method of changing a person's behaviour. In the context of corporal punishment in schools, the methods described in the first quote are the most likely to be encountered, and therefore the most useful for the context of this essay. It is also important to note the highlight of corporal punishment being used as a method of discipline in both the home and in school. The predominant amount of related research refers to corporal punishment within the home, however it can be taken from the definition that research in the context of using corporal punishment to change a child's behaviour can be applied to the context of a school also. For the purpose of the essay we shall draw on the definition that *Corporal punishment refers to intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior*, however this opposition is grounded in the context of Human Rights and as such the extent to which corporal punishment is a *cruel and inhumane punishment*. In the context of the school system this is likely to include, *hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, choking, use of various objects (wooden paddles, sticks, or others), painful body postures, and the use of excessive exercise drills*.

Corporal punishment is a contested issue in the school system. In the context of the UK, where corporal punishment was outlawed in 1986, a common question has been 'Should corporal punishment return to the classroom?', often resulting in such a range of responses that it is obvious there is no consensus on the issue<sup>4</sup>, and certainly not enough to reinstate its use in UK schools. Arguments in favour of corporal punishment often refer to it as not being a form of child abuse unless it is used excessively, and that governments should not 'dictate whether a teacher or parent should flog a child'<sup>5</sup>, echoing a Victorian laissez-faire approach to discipline. However as journalists document opinions for the implementation of corporal punishment, so to do others put forward opinions against, in particular US children television actor and producer Bob Keesham who advocated that the US should "abandon for all time the corporal punishment of our children."<sup>6</sup> Statistics are often meted out, for example in an article by a US attorney-at-law: 'the 10 states having the highest school-paddling rates are the same 10 states with the highest prison-incarceration rates.'<sup>7</sup> Qualitative cases include that of the story of Megan Cahanin, an apparent honour student in a Louisiana elementary school who quit school following the incident. This later resulted in a court case against the school.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore many agencies and organizations advocate against the use of corporal punishment. Examples include the National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools (NCACPS), the Society for Adolescent Medicine whom produced a strong position paper advocating against the use of corporal punishment<sup>9</sup>, and the Global Initiative to End All Corporal

Punishment of Children, which takes a stance that research into corporal punishment is unnecessary to prove that corporal punishment should be prohibited, as the issue is one of human rights.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments surrounding the issue of corporal punishment are certainly emotive and as such draw a sometimes polarized set of views as to its effectiveness and implementation and certainly in approaching the subject itself. From the articles above, the most common theme when approaching corporal punishment is that of the use of hitting using an object, typically a paddle or stick. The intention of using this method of discipline is for a quick and (contextually assuming) effective response from the student. This essay will now focus on research related to corporal punishment in order to establish a more objective argument against the use of corporal punishment.

Elizabeth Elmer & Grace Gregg pioneered research into corporal punishment with their paper of development characteristics of abused children in 1967<sup>11</sup>. Since then research has found associations between an increased risk of aggression and delinquency and corporal punishment.<sup>12</sup> The work of Straus (2003) has consistently noted that "physical abuse of children is known to adversely affect cognitive performance", drawing on the work of various others in the context of the US. These findings are reiterated in the work of Poole et al<sup>13</sup> (1991) whose research concluded;

*"corporal punishment increased aggressive and destructive behavior, increased disruptive classroom behavior, vandalism, poor school achievement, poor attention span, increased drop-out rate, school avoidance and school phobia, low self-esteem, anxiety, somatic complaints, depression, suicide and retaliation against teacher."*

Research also indicates long term effects to corporal punishment, Aldarando and Sugarman<sup>14</sup> (1996) noting that corporal punishment in adolescence was inversely related to graduation from college. Quantitative studies by Strauss have reiterated these effects, noting that '*CP in childhood and adolescence is associated with lower economic and occupational achievement in adulthood*' (Straus and Gimpel 2001)<sup>15</sup> and in a study of more than 800 mothers over a period from 1988 to 1992, children who were spanked were more rebellious even after taking into accounting their initial behaviors concluding that "The problem with corporal punishment is that it has lasting effects that include increased aggression and social difficulties."

Further Straus work includes the recent presentation to the 14th International Conference On Violence, Abuse And Trauma, where his paper used data on 17,404 university students from, 32 nations that drew a conclusion that the higher the percentage of parents who used corporal punishment, the lower the national average IQ, reiterating the conclusion that the increased use of corporal punishment has a positive relationship with the decrease in academic

performance.<sup>16</sup> A more alarmist finding is from Hyman et al<sup>17</sup> (1977), on the psychological disorder 'Educationally Induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (EIPSID) drawing alarmist parallels with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Further studies also suggest a racial link with corporal punishment, Harvard professor Alvin Poussaint indicating that over 80% of black prison inmates were severely punished or neglected as children and that the more children are beaten the more likely they are to use violence in responding to problems.<sup>18</sup>

To conclude, academic studies and sources find corporal punishment to be highly detrimental to child development, particularly cognitively and its implementation likely results in long-lasting psychological effects.

Another issue to be considered is the historical context of corporal punishment, or rather how corporal punishment became an issue considering it had been standard practice historically in education. Particularly in the post-war period, Human Rights have become a global standard for the treatment of human beings, particularly the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. An increased intensity of integrated human activity, has created the grounds for a more internationalised world, in particular international standards that have had positive effects on previously underrepresented groups. Racial and gender equality have certainly taken strides, as have those of the rights of children on the international scene. In this context corporal punishment has become an issue, and as such has been fully outlawed (including in the home) in over twenty countries<sup>i</sup>, and as such it should be seen that as the rights of other groups have progressed and historical norms been overturned, so too should the issue of corporal punishment.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>19</sup> article 5 states;

*No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.*

The above research and definition of corporal punishment as *the intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behaviour* fulfils the definition as a cruel and degrading punishment and as such corporal punishment is incompatible with the UDHR. Furthermore the 1989 Convention on the rights of the Child further focuses on child<sup>20</sup> context, article 19.1 stating;

"States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or

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<sup>i</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Latvia, Moldova, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine. It is illegal in schools (but not the home) in some US states, Russia, Belarus, China, United Kingdom etc

exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child."

The use of corporal punishment violates this convention and given that this is legally binding<sup>ii</sup>, the conclusion is that corporal punishment is accepted as being internationally illegal. It can therefore be stated that corporal punishment is incompatible with modern convention and should be confined to history.

Corporal punishment is an ineffective and detrimental punishment method that not only undermines the development of a child but can lead to long-lasting psychological effects. It reinforces bad behaviour and introduces the use of violence as a constructive tool for young developing minds. Furthermore it is an inconsistent and disruptive method of discipline, that reflects the vulnerabilities of the teacher rather than highlighting the delinquencies of the child. Corporal punishment does create a positive or constructive relationship between the teacher and the students. Effective and consistent discipline plans, one to one interaction and teaching performance are much more effective methods, not only of teaching delivery, but also class management. Creating an atmosphere of fear is in contrast to the teaching mission of developing young minds to be active and objective and strips students of their right to a free and fair education not only for themselves but also for other teachers whose positive and effective class management can be undermined by teachers who resort to violence, effectively meaning if corporal punishment is on offer as a technique, it may well be the only one students respond too. By definition corporal punishment does not mean the prevention of physical intervention or light physical methods being implemented, however the use of physical force to exact a behavioural reaction is an unacceptable and unjust method of discipline. We must offer incentives for students to learn, and thus must be self-respect and confidence, we must offers students a carrot, not a stick.

*"Cane our students? We don't even shout at them! We treat all our students with respect"<sup>21</sup>*

- John Murphy (School Principal)

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<sup>ii</sup> Unlike the UDHR



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