

Smacking and physical punishment

Introduction

People often have strong opinions about whether smacking is right or wrong, helpful or harmful, or whether parents should even have the right to smack their children.

It can be overwhelming for parents when outsiders – including other parents, onlookers, politicians or various experts – weigh into the debate about how they should raise their children.

But it can be equally difficult and confusing for the children and young people at the centre of the debate.

Why does this matter?

A balancing act

Because Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* says children and young people are entitled to have their opinions listened to and taken seriously.

In terms of the smacking debate, this seems only fair; after all, it is children and young people who may be smacked or physically punished by their parents.

So while parents have a **legal responsibility** to care for and protect their children, they are generally free to raise their children according to their own **values and beliefs**, unless by doing so, the safety or wellbeing of their children is put at **risk**.

Does smacking put children and young people at risk?

The *Macquarie Dictionary Online* defines smack to mean ‘to strike smartly, especially with the open hand or anything flat’.

It appears the occasional smack is commonplace in Australia, with one online poll finding that **85 per cent** of respondents smacked their children.

Other polls have founds that parents smack for a variety of **reasons**.

They may smack out of fright or a desire to protect their children from danger, such as when a young child runs towards a busy road.

They may be frustrated or exhausted and momentarily lose their **temper**.

They may feel under pressure from others to pull their children into **line**. Or they may recall their own childhood and reason that receiving the **occasional smack from their parents** did not do them any harm.

While one educational psychologist has **suggested** that an occasional smack “doesn’t irreparably harm the child - IF it’s balanced with love and caring”, those who oppose the use of physical punishment warn that smacking can have serious consequences.

These include:

- Failing to teach children and young people **wrong from right**, which prevents any long-term behavioural change

- Causing children to become [fearful and untrusting](#) of their parents, which may rupture the parent-child relationship and encourage children and young people to seek [revenge](#) against their parents as they grow up
- Reinforcing the message that aggression and violence is the best way to [resolve conflict](#)
- Reducing a child's psychological, social, emotional and cognitive [wellbeing](#)
- Having to use incrementally harsher punishments over time to get the same result, which can blur the already fuzzy line between physical punishment and abuse – something that is particularly concerning given the increasing prevalence of family violence in Australian society

Is smacking allowed?

In South Australia, it is [unlawful](#) for children and young people to be smacked in alternative care settings, day care facilities, schools and youth training centres. Striking another person can amount to [assault](#), while criminal charges may be laid against anyone accused of mistreating [animals](#).

Yet parents are still allowed to smack their children if their actions are '[reasonable](#)' and done for genuine disciplinary purposes.

But what is 'reasonable'? It is likely to mean different things to different people. Such ambiguity risks causing [confusion](#) and greater uncertainty, both for parents and for children and young people.

Definitions aside, there is also a risk that the continued acceptance of smacking and other forms of physical punishment in Australian culture may amount to a [serious violation](#) of international human rights agreements, including the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

How does Australia compare to the rest of the world?

Australia ratified the United Nations' [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) in 1990. In doing so, the government agreed to prevent children from being hurt or mistreated.

As the most widely ratified human rights instrument in the world, the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) has been signed by [196 parties](#). Only [two countries](#) – the United States of America and Somalia – are not yet signatories.

There are now [52 countries](#) around the world that have taken their commitment a step further and made it illegal for parents to smack their children.

Australia is not one of these countries.

The United States of America and the United Kingdom are also [noticeably absent](#) from the list.

This lack of action has led to [criticism](#) from the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which recommended again in [2012](#) that Australia completely bans the use of smacking and physical punishment.

Case Study: 'Courageous' New Zealand

New Zealand completely banned smacking and other forms of physical punishment in 2007, becoming the first English speaking country to do so.

Despite some concerns about how the law would affect parents and their ability to discipline their children, researchers found that there was [no significant increase](#) in the number of complaints being made about minor acts of discipline, nor was anyone prosecuted for a minor act of discipline.

Different people, different perspectives

Some people are bewildered when they see parents choosing to smack their children as a way of correcting their behaviour or attempting to resolve conflict.

[Research](#) has shown that smacking and physical punishment can cause children and young people to feel angry, sad, frightened or confused. They have also [reported](#) feeling disillusioned, humiliated or reticent after having been smacked, which can trigger feelings of [resentment and hatred](#) towards the person delivering the smack.

Interestingly, parents can experience a range of emotions after smacking their children, with [anecdotal evidence](#) suggesting that many feel angry or wracked with guilt for resorting to smacking. Nonetheless, they do not want to be [judged](#) for how they choose to respond in particular situations.

Case Study: ‘Progressive’ Sweden

Sweden abolished all forms of physical punishment against children in 1979.

Rather than taking a punitive approach, the government initiated a widespread [educational campaign](#) aimed to encourage parents to seek help with child management difficulties and to learn about different ways of disciplining their children.

Over a generation later, there are [claims](#) that attitudes towards violence and physical punishment have changed for the better in Sweden.

The best way to discipline children and young people

And, arguably, there is a good reason why they should not be judged.

According to the [Raising Children Network](#), discipline is about helping children learn how to behave appropriately.

But there is no set way for how this should be achieved. Individual values, beliefs and parenting styles; along with the age, temperament and developmental stage of the child or young person, are all important factors for parents to consider when deciding how to discipline their children.

Striving to achieve balance and consistency, as well as considering the rights of children and young people, may also help when deciding on an appropriate course of action.

Summary

South Australian parents are generally free to make their own decisions about how to raise their children.

While most experts are highly concerned about the links between physical punishment and violence, smacking is still permissible if it is ‘reasonable’ and done for genuine disciplinary purposes.

Individual values, beliefs and parenting styles; along with the age, temperament and developmental stage of the child or young person, are all important factors for parents to consider when deciding how to discipline their children.

Striving to achieve balance and consistency, as well as considering the rights of children and young people, may also help when deciding on an appropriate course of action.
