

Smacking and physical punishment

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.

smack
(verb)

to strike smartly, especially with the open hand or anything flat

Macquarie Dictionary Online (2017)

macquariedictionary.com.au

A balancing act...

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.

This seems only fair; after all, it is children and young people who may be smacked or physically punished by their parents.

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



CASE STUDY

New Zealand

In 2007, New Zealand became the first English-speaking country to completely ban smacking and other physical punishment in what has been described as a 'courageous' move.

Why do parents smack?

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

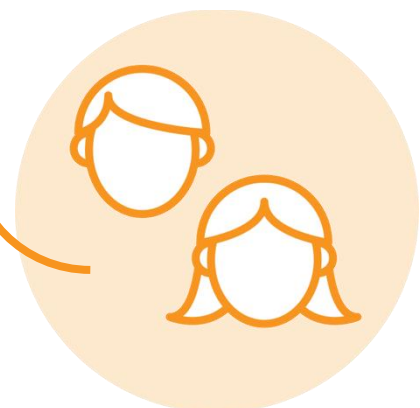
Other polls have found that parents smack for a variety of **reasons**.

'Fear or a sense of danger, like when they run towards the road'

'Frustration, exhaustion or a momentary loss of **temper**'

'Pressure to pull my children into **line**'

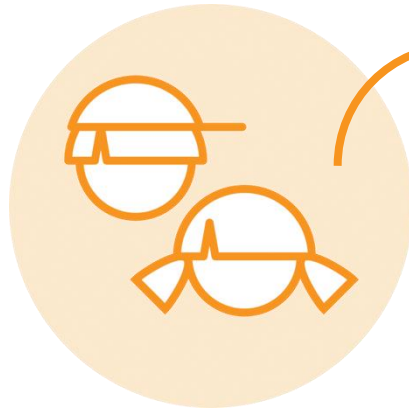
I was **smacked as a child** & I turned out fine'



Does smacking put children and young people at risk?

One educational psychologist has suggested that an occasional smack “doesn’t irreparably harm the child – IF it’s balanced with love and caring”.

But those who oppose physical punishment warn that smacking can rupture the parent-child relationship and trigger many adverse flow-on effects.



‘Fails to teach **wrong from right** so prevents long-term behavioural change’

‘Causes **fear & distrust** & may trigger acts of **revenge**’

‘Teaches that aggression & violence **resolve conflict**’

‘Reduces psychological, social, emotional & cognitive **wellbeing**’

‘Has been linked to later life **mental health** diagnoses’

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.

One legal expert believes that the continued acceptance of smacking and other forms of physical punishment in Australian culture amounts 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*.

‘**children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society**’

– Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom*

Different people, different perspectives

But ‘reasonable’ means different things to different people, causing **confusion** and uncertainty.

The negative feelings triggered by a smack also vary between children and young people and their parents.

Research has shown that smacking and physical punishment often leaves children and young people feeling 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.

How Australia compares: the UN’s *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

1990

Australia ratified the convention, agreeing to prevent children from being hurt or mistreated.

196 parties

have signed the convention, with **the USA & Somalia** being the only exceptions.

52 countries

have **made it illegal** for parents to smack their children.

Australia, the USA & the UK are **noticeably absent** from this list, despite significant **criticism**.

2012

The Committee on the Rights of the Child **recommended** again that Australia completely prohibits smacking and physical punishment.

The best way to discipline children and young people

Arguably, there is a good reason why parents should not be judged for how they choose to discipline their children.

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.

CASE STUDY

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.

Key points

- 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.

