



# Fact Sheet

## Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
March 2020



### Smack (verb)

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

Macquarie Dictionary Online (2017)

## 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.



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### 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 found 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

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

'Frustration, exhaustion or a momentary loss of temper'

'Fails to teach wrong from right so prevents long-term behavioural change'

I was smacked as a child and I turned out fine'

'Pressure to pull my children into line'

'Teaches that aggression & violence resolve conflict'

'Causes fear and distrust and may trigger acts of revenge'

'Reduces psychological, social, emotional & cognitive wellbeing'

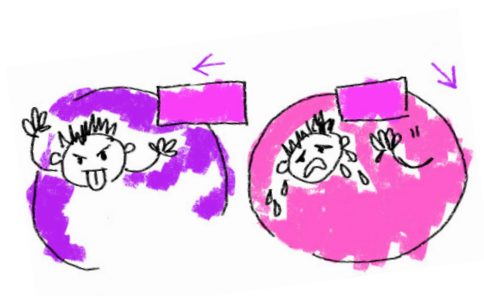
'Has been linked to later life mental health diagnoses'



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### 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 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.

*'children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society'*

– Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom*





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**\* To SMACK or NOT TO SMACK? \*** <http://occyp.sa.gov.au>

Parenting is **HARD** at the best of times and **Disciplining** kids is difficult (everyone has an opinion!)

You can **DROWN** in information

Medical Research  
Education  
your views  
what other people think  
Help!

and there are often **COMPETING VIEWS**

**IT'S SO CONFUSING!!**

**DON'T?**  
misbehave, no respect for authority

**DO?**  
future mental health issues?

**BUT** it's equally tricky for kids

you hit him so I'll smack you!

**TO SMACK OR NOT TO SMACK?**

my feelings  
other types of punishment  
research

kid's feelings + rights  
consequences

Convention on Rights of the Child 1990

Promise to stop children being hurt

But ok in SA for disciplinary reasons

It's your choice

Sweden bans smacking  
Attitudes are changing



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### 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.

### 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: '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.

### 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.



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### 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.

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### Key Facts

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