



Physical punishment of children¹

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Physical punishment is an action intended to cause physical discomfort or pain to put an end to a child's behaviour. It may take the form of spanking or slapping with a hand, hitting with an implement, requiring a child to remain motionless or hold an uncomfortable position, forcing a child to kneel on hard objects, placing foul tasting substances in a child's mouth, or other means of "teaching a lesson" through physical force and pain.

Attempts to distinguish physical punishment from physical abuse have not been successful. In fact, the majority of cases of reported and substantiated child physical abuse are situations of physical punishment.²

How many parents physically punish their children?

Estimates of prevalence among Canadian parents range from 10% to 85%. Due to methodological difficulties in obtaining valid reports, it is likely that most figures underestimate the actual prevalence rate. While most studies have found that a majority of parents have used physical punishment, few believe that it is effective or necessary and most believe that it is harmful. Most parents would prefer to resolve conflict and deal with their own frustration in more constructive ways.

Which children are most at risk?

Most studies have found that preschoolers are most at risk of being physically punished. However, substantial proportions of younger and older children are also physically punished. For example, 49% of Quebec parents of children aged two and younger reported physically punishing them within the previous year.³ And adolescents were the victims in 38% of substantiated cases of physical abuse resulting from punishment reported in the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect.²

Which parents are most likely to engage in physical punishment?

Parents who were physically punished as children, who approve of physical punishment, who respond to parent-child conflict with anger, and/or who interpret children's transgressions as intentional and serious are most likely to respond with physical punishment. Parental

depression and family stress are also predictors of physical punishment. Research findings regarding the contributions of parental gender, education, age, and income to physical punishment are conflicting.

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What risks does physical punishment pose for children?

Physical punishment has been linked to a number of negative developmental outcomes:

- *Physical injury:* the more often parents use even mild physical punishment, the more likely they are to inflict severe violence.
- *Impaired parent-child relationships:* even by age two, physical punishment is associated with children avoiding their parents.
- *Poorer mental health:* physical punishment is associated with depression, unhappiness and anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness in children.
- *Weaker moral internalization:* children who are physically punished are less likely to resist temptation, show altruism, or respond empathically than those who are not physically punished.

- *Increased aggression*: physical punishment predicts increased levels of aggression against peers, siblings, and parents.
- *Antisocial behaviour*: delinquency, bullying, lying, and lack of remorse tend to increase over the long term in children who are physically punished.
- *Poorer adult adjustment*: childhood experience of physical punishment is related to aggression, antisocial and criminal behaviour, and violence against family members in adulthood.
- *Greater tolerance of violence*: adults who were severely physically punished as children are more likely to consider severe punishments to be non-abusive.

Parents' disciplinary choices provide powerful models to children that teach them how to handle their own everyday challenges.

What is an effective and constructive alternative to handling parent-child conflict?

An important aspect of effective parenting is the balancing of short- and long-term goals. An important long-term goal of parenting is to teach children constructive problem-solving skills, anger management, empathy, and effective communication. Parents' disciplinary choices provide powerful models to children that teach them how to handle their own everyday challenges.

Constructive methods for guiding children's behaviour include:

- communicating expectations clearly
- modeling appropriate behaviour
- recognizing and acknowledging positive behaviour
- explaining the reasons for rules and limits
- monitoring and supervising the child's activities
- planning and preparing for challenging situations
- establishing expectations and limits ahead of time
- using fair and logical consequences consistently when rules are broken
- respecting the child's growing need for independence
- listening to the child's perspective
- modeling problem-solving
- learning effective ways of communicating with children
- helping the child to find constructive means of communication
- teaching fairness, justice, and empathy

- learning more about normal developmental stages of childhood
- developing skills to prevent conflicts before they start or escalate
- recognizing anger triggers and developing strategies to manage them.

An extensive list of resources for parents and caregivers is provided in the *Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth*.¹

Conclusion

A large body of scientific evidence indicates that physical punishment poses a risk to children's safety and development. In order to reduce its prevalence, public awareness campaigns must deliver a clear and consistent message that physical punishment places children at risk of physical and psychological harm. Moreover, universal parent education and support programs must be implemented to increase Canadians' knowledge of child development and to promote positive and constructive strategies for socializing children.

- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed report, Durrant, J.E., Ensom, R., & Wingert, S. (2003). *Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth* (pre-publication edition). Ottawa, ON, Canada: Coalition on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth. Available at http://www.cheo.on.ca/english/pdf/joint_statement_e.pdf
- 2 Trocmé, N., & Durrant, J.E. (2003). Physical punishment and the response of the Canadian child welfare system: Implications for legislative reform. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 25(1), 39–56.
- 3 Clément, M.E., Bouchard, C., Jetté, M., Laferrière, S. (2000). *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec*, Quebec City, QC, Canada: Institut de la Statistique du Québec.

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