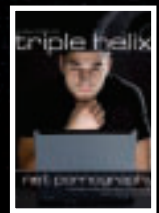


# Should parents smack their children?



This article is based on an item entitled 'Researching the Rod', by the same author, which appeared in the Autumn 2006 edition of *Triple Helix*, published by the Christian Medical Fellowship.



## A good smack

I feel sorry for parents today. So many people tell them not to smack their children. They are told that smacking only modifies behaviour in the short-term. They are told that it models violent behaviour and can therefore teach the child to be violent towards others. If a child's behaviour must be changed then they are told that it can be done more effectively by other 'non-violent' means. The logic of these arguments, based as they are on the social psychology of aggression and the behaviourist theory of reinforcement, seems to be irrefutable.

Yet many parents remember being smacked as children and do not believe it did them any harm. Grandparents and others from the older generation can tell them to be stricter with their children and to use 'a good smack' if necessary. In addition, if Christian parents turn to the Bible they find that King Solomon advocates corporal (physical) punishment as a means of disciplining children.<sup>1</sup> But what are parents to do? Does smacking make children more or less violent? Does smacking make children more or less controllable? Does it make them more or less respectful of authority? In short, is King Solomon right? Or is 'a good smack' simply a contradiction in terms?

*Every child (like every adult) is both created in the image of God and therefore capable of doing good and fallen and capable of doing evil*

## *King Solomon advocates corporal (physical) punishment as a means of disciplining children*

A recent meta-analysis undertaken by Robert E Larzelere and Brett R Kuhn concluded that smacking is no less effective, and may sometimes be better, than other disciplinary tactics in modifying children's long-term behaviour.<sup>2</sup> The authors also concluded that, contrary to the social psychology theory of aggression, smacking does not promote any more, and sometimes promotes less, antisocial violence than other disciplinary techniques.

## Four types of smack

Importantly, Larzelere and Kuhn distinguish between four different types of smacking:

- **Conditional smacking** is non-abusively smacking a child who responds defiantly to milder tactics such as time out.
- **Customary smacking** is smacking as it is typically used, based mostly on studies of smacking frequency without specifying how it was used.
- **Overly severe smacking** describes the excessive use of force or slapping the face.
- **Predominant smacking** is the term used when smacking is the parent's primary disciplinary method.

According to Larzelere and Kuhn, conditional smacking reduced antisocial behaviour significantly more than did ten of the thirteen alternative disciplinary tactics (such as reasoning, removal of privileges, love withdrawal, ignoring and restraint). There was no difference compared to the other three tactics: a brief forced isolation (based on three studies), a combination of non-physical punishment and reasoning (one study) and verbal prohibition (one study).

Only overly severe and predominant smacking compared unfavourably with other disciplinary responses. Most research on conditional smacking has been done on two-to-six year olds. It appears that age-appropriate, conditional smacking – especially when used to back-up and enforce other, milder disciplinary tactics – has a role to play as part of an effective package of responses for both the short and long term. When so used, milder disciplinary tactics become more effective by themselves, rendering smacking less necessary subsequently.

### Smacking in religious families

In my own research I asked people in Scotland and England about the parenting they had received as children.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I asked about the person who had ‘the most influence’ on them as a child; the behaviour modification methods used by that person; and that person’s religious activity, if any. The vast majority of people named their father or mother as the person who had the most influence on their early life. People who had been brought up by parents who read the Bible, attended church, prayed and talked about their God and faith were no more likely than others to have experienced physical punishment before the age of twelve; after that, they actually reported less physical punishment.

*If you don't punish your children, you don't love them. If you do love them, you will correct them.*

**PROVERBS 13:24 (GOOD NEWS BIBLE, AMERICAN VERSION)**

What I found most interesting was that people who had religiously active parents were more likely to say that the physical punishment they experienced was due to a *child oriented* reason. In other words, they perceived the parent as being motivated by love and concern for the child and by a desire to see the child behave appropriately. People with religiously active parents were also less likely to say that the physical punishment they received was due to a *parent oriented* reason (eg due to parental

*Correction and discipline are good for children. If they have their own way, they will make their mothers ashamed of them.*

**PROVERBS 29:15 (GOOD NEWS BIBLE, AMERICAN VERSION)**



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anger, or a desire to inflict pain or ‘show who is boss’).

Religiously active parents were also less likely to discipline by the withdrawal of affection or approval. Overall, religiously active parents were rated more highly by their children in terms of sensitivity to needs, fairness of discipline, understanding of feelings and the degree of trust the child had in the parent. The essential element here seemed to be whether the parent talked about God and faith. I found that these results were the same whether or not the child had continued with the parent’s religious activity.

### Conditional smacking works

In conclusion, it would seem from the research evidence that conditional smacking is an effective disciplinary tactic. It would also appear that, while no one is ever perfect, parents with a Christian religious commitment are, on the whole, highly rated by their children – at least they are when the children become adults. I suspect that this is due, in part, to a biblical understanding of who a child is. Every child (like every adult) is *both* created in the image of God and therefore capable of doing good *and* fallen and capable of doing evil. Once this is recognised, the parent can begin to respond to both good and bad behaviour appropriately.

Whether teachers should be allowed to use corporal punishment is another question. The teacher is not the parent; the classroom is not the home. What is right and appropriate in one context is not necessarily so in another. To answer this question we need to keep talking; we will need to do more research; we need to have the humility to learn from each other and from God’s Word; and we need to keep praying.

■ John Steley

### Footnotes

- 1 Proverbs 13:24, 23:13, 29:15.
- 2 Larzelere, R.E. and Kuhn, B.R. (2005) Comparing Child Outcomes of Physical Punishment and Alternative Disciplinary Tactics: A Meta-Analysis. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 8(1), 1–37.
- 3 Steley, J.R. (1997) *Parental Discipline and Religious Commitment as Recalled by Adult Children* (Thesis). London: Heythrop College, University of London.