



Physical punishment of children: ineffective and harmful

Ban this counterproductive form of discipline

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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2026;394:e100233

<http://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2026-100233>

Published: 16 July 2026

Physical, or corporal, punishment—euphemistically known as smacking, spanking, and slapping—involves hitting or otherwise hurting children to modify their behaviour.¹ Most countries do not consider it assault and permit its use in homes and schools.² Unicef estimates that over 1 billion of the world's 2.4 billion children are disciplined this way each year, making it the commonest form of violence against children.^{3,4}

In 2025 a World Health Organization report cited “overwhelming scientific evidence” that physical punishment is linked entirely with harms and no benefits to children, describing it as a public health concern requiring policy and educational interventions to end its use.⁵ This body of research from lower and higher income settings shows four main findings.

First, physical punishment is ineffective at improving children's behaviour in the short or long term.^{6–8} Instead, children who are physically punished tend to become more aggressive and have more behaviour problems than others.^{5–7} A recent analysis of UK representative data, for example, found that adolescents who experienced physical punishment in early childhood were 35% more likely to report having hit, pushed, or shoved someone at age 14 years.⁹

Second, it increases the risks of numerous harms to children. Children who are physically punished have significantly worse mental health, lower levels of social competence, lower levels of academic achievement, and worse relationships with parents.^{6–9} Randomised controlled trials cannot be conducted for obvious ethical reasons, but quasi-experimental designs using econometric methods and genetically informed twin studies indicate that physical punishment causes detrimental outcomes.^{10–11} Imaging studies have begun to map changes to brain structure and functioning that may explain these effects.^{12–13}

Third, physical punishment can escalate into physical abuse—that is, intentional use of force that results in, or has the potential to result in, physical injury.¹⁴ A review in Canada found that 75% of physical abuse cases began with physical punishment.¹⁵ Physical punishment and physical abuse are associated with the same types of harm to children⁷ and should be seen as different points on a continuum of violence.¹⁶

Fourth, findings of harm are not confined to specific countries or cultures. Although initial research was mostly conducted in high income countries, a recent pre-registered meta-analysis of 189 studies conducted in 92 low and middle income countries found that, in all regions of the world, physical punishment was

associated with the same negative outcomes as in high income countries, namely, physical health problems, mental health problems, substance use, poor academic outcomes, increased behaviour problems, and higher risk of being a victim of violence.¹⁷ In another study that combined data from 49 low and middle income countries, children exposed to physical punishment were about 24% less likely to be developmentally on track than those not exposed.⁸

Human rights violation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear that all children have the human right to protection from all forms of violence, including physical punishment.¹⁸ In response to the convention and the health evidence, 32 low and middle income countries and 38 high income countries have prohibited all physical punishment of children, including in the home.²

Legislative bans, supported by national and global health organisations^{3,19,20} are associated with reduced reported use of physical punishment and reduced social acceptance.^{21–24} Findings from low, middle, and high income countries indicate that bans are linked with improvements to children's lives. A comparison in 88 countries, including 52 low and middle income countries, found that countries with bans, including Colombia and Thailand, had 31% lower rates of youth engaged in physical aggression than countries without bans, such as China, Iraq, and Uganda.²⁵ A longitudinal analysis in 97 countries including 54 low and middle income countries found lower rates of youth suicide in countries with bans, such as Brazil, Tunisia, and Ukraine, compared with countries that do not have bans, such as Mexico and Sri Lanka.²⁶

Opponents of bans may claim that they infringe on parents' rights, constitute state interference in family life, and criminalise parents for minor transgressions.^{27–28} But the UN has concluded that children's right to protection from violence does not conflict with parents' rights,¹ and there is no controversy regarding state intervention when the victims of family violence are adults.^{28–29}

Legal reform aims to protect children, not to penalise parents, and is most effective when accompanied by public education campaigns and parenting programmes that support the use of other forms of discipline.^{21,27} Sweden and New Zealand initially saw increased numbers of reported incidents after law reform, but the proportion of prosecutions remained steady or declined.²⁷ In Wales, no parent received a criminal conviction in the three years of monitoring since the ban began; instead, nearly all (95%) of the

parents who attended parenting classes as an alternative to prosecution reported more confidence in their parenting or improvements in their children's behaviour.³⁰

Emotional distress and confusion

Research on children's experiences and perceptions is scarce, but qualitative studies have highlighted children's physical pain, emotional distress, and confusion when their parents have used physical punishment.^{31–34}

Physical punishment by parents and carers remains legal in 129 countries, including England and Northern Ireland.² Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, and they should have the same legal protection from assault as adults. The evidence is clear: physical punishment is universally harmful to children and ineffective as discipline. We should all remind our political leaders that banning physical punishment of children is mandated by international law—and an evidence based priority for children's health and wellbeing.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Competing interests: *The BMJ* has judged that there are no disqualifying financial ties to commercial companies. The authors declare the following other interests: AH and RL's work on physical punishment in the UK was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. SH was the Children's Commissioner for Wales from 2015–22 and advocated for, then advised and scrutinised, the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020. EG was supported by grant P2CHD042849 awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. Further details of *The BMJ* policy on financial interests is here: <https://www.bmj.com/sites/default/files/attachments/resources/2016/03/16-current-bmj-education-coi-form.pdf>.

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