

## Neglect, not smacking, is the public health issue. To conceive and leave should be against the law

Last month saw the coming into law of a ban on parents hitting their children. The Children Act doesn't impose a total ban on physical punishment. What it does is outlaw 'abusive punishment', defined as punishment that grazes, scratches, bruises, leaves any mark, or causes mental harm. I think the government has got this just about right. Although still leaving too much room for interpretation, it clarifies what constitutes 'physical abuse', without adding too much to the anxiety already felt by parents and professionals who work with children.

In my view the children's rights argument suffers from a naïve, rose-tinted view of childhood that, paradoxically, deprives children of their status as children by regarding them as mini-adults. This view implicitly denies that children are in a dependent relationship to their carers, who have (and need to have) a responsibility and a hierarchical position of power over them. Paternalistic interventions in the lives of children are sometimes justified – for example, not allowing children to buy alcohol or cigarettes or to drive a car.

What such notions of children's rights also imply is that children are passive individuals waiting to be victimised, who have no ability to manipulate to their advantage power relationships in families and other institutions. As a practising child and adolescent psychiatrist, I know this is not true. An unforeseen side effect of the children's rights culture has been children holding adults to ransom by threatening them with Child Line, or alleging physical abuse.

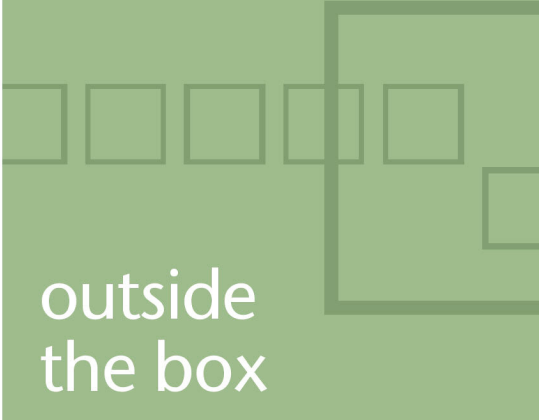
Research shows that almost all adults in the UK today were smacked at some point. However, unless I am deluded and all around me are deeply traumatised, the vast majority of us haven't been harmed by this. Nor does comparison with countries that have outlawed physical punishment make the argument for banning smacking any more supportable.<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, rates of physical child abuse increased sharply following their 1979 smacking ban: assaults by relatives on children under the age of seven increased nearly fivefold between 1981 and 1994, as did child-on-child violence.<sup>2</sup>

What really concerns me, however, is the discriminatory potential of a smacking ban in a multi-cultural society such as

ours. We in the west have developed a peculiar form of hands-off, 'cognitive parenting' that has left us fearful of physical engagement with our children (not just on the punishment side). Non-western cultures tend to be less squeamish. Western cultures have seen a rise in psychosocial problems (such as behaviour problems, suicidal behaviour, unhappiness and substance abuse) among the young in the past few decades. Such problems are less common in many non-western cultures, where children are welcomed into stable, nurturing, extended family structures where duty and responsibility over-ride individualism as the dominant value system.<sup>3</sup> This shouldn't be interpreted as evidence that corporal punishment is good for children, but it does suggest that its impact (in isolation from the broader context) is not as great a public health issue as many believe, and that making smacking illegal may in fact undermine systems of child rearing that are serving some parents from non-western cultural backgrounds much better than the ones currently fashionable in the liberal middle classes of the west.

Perhaps the most important factor that seems to give children in many non-western cultures a happier childhood is the bigger social support network into which they are born. Our obsessive focus on the individual and attempts to over-regulate and take professional control over the messy business of parent-child relationships has resulted in an epidemic of over-medication for the behavioural control of children (through dumping-ground diagnoses like ADHD). Worst still, it has perpetuated a conspiracy of silence about a far more pressing child protection issue that contributes far more to child mortality and morbidity – that of parental neglect.<sup>4</sup> From my professional experience, physical punishment is most damaging when it is accompanied by chronic rejection.

Market economies demand social mobility and longer working hours. Children have lost the social circle of the extended family; they have lost their parents to the workplace; many grow up having no contact with one parent (most often the father) and that whole side of the family. When are we going to criminalise this? Unlike smacking, to conceive and leave is so damaging it should be against the law.



outside  
the box

- 1 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. A league table of child maltreatment deaths in rich nations. Report card 03/7. Annunziata: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2003. [<http://ideas.repec.org/p/ucf/inreca/inreca03-7.html>]
- 2 Wittrock U. Barnmisshandel, 1984-1994. [Violent crimes against children, 1984-1994.] KR info 1995: 5. Stockholm: SCB (Central Office for Vital Statistics), 1995. [<http://people.biola.edu/faculty/paulp/sweden84.html>]
- 3 Timimi S. Naughty boys: anti-social behaviour, ADHD and the role of culture. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- 4 Kincheloe J. The new childhood: home alone as a way of life. In: Jenkins H (ed). Children's culture reader. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

The monthly column by consultant child psychiatrist Sami Timimi that tests the boundaries of mental health politics and practice