

Moving Away from Slapping and Promoting Effective Discipline to Raise Healthy Children in Ireland

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As far back as 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child called on all member states (including Ireland) to ban the corporal punishment of children and to institute educational programmes on positive discipline ¹. Thanks in no small measure to the persistence of Senator Jillian van Turnhout, Ireland since 2015 is among 52 countries to have banned corporal punishment. Compelling international evidence has since emerged to fully highlight the long-term effects of slapping children.

Slapping is typically defined as hitting a child on buttocks with an open hand. Recent evidence shows ² shows a very clear link between slapping alone and several poor adult outcomes including suicide attempts, moderate to heavy drinking and drug use. Slapping is also associated with increased aggression, antisocial behaviour and externalizing behaviours during childhood and adolescence. In the United States, slapping is still relatively prevalent and nationally representative data indicate that up to 80% of children have been slapped by the time they are in kindergarten ².

We have no figures as yet to say whether legislative change in Ireland has actually brought about a change in attitudes or behaviour in relation to slapping children as legislation on its own is most unlikely to be effective. We do know from international evidence that, for both men and women, harsh physical punishment in childhood (including pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping and hitting) is associated with antisocial behaviours in adulthood.

The case has also been made ³ to consider slapping as an adverse childhood event with a growing body of evidence indicating the long-term impact of adverse childhood events (ACEs) on poor adult health outcomes. Other ACEs include child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect and exposure to a mother or father being treated violently), parental divorce or separation and a household member with substance abuse, severe mental illness or a suicide attempt.

Assuring safe, stable, nurturing environments is essential for all children and is essential for healthy growth and development, effective parenting in the future and safer communities. The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) ⁴ in 2018 felt compelled to issue a policy statement on slapping.

The AAP ⁴ define slapping as 'any punishment in which physical force is used that intends to cause some degree of physical discomfort or pain, however light'. They acknowledge also that verbal abuse by parents intended to cause shame or humiliation has likewise a deleterious effect on a child's self-esteem. While, in children with behavioural

issues, some short term effectiveness of slapping has been in the past demonstrated, there is no long-term benefit and indeed the opposite is true – recent evidence suggests that corporal punishment of toddlers is associated with subsequent aggressive behaviour ⁵. Subsequent bad behaviour causes a negative spiral and can and does lead to further slapping. This may be especially true of children who are in foster care who may have previously experienced physical abuse or neglect and committed foster parents need to adopt different non-violent strategies to address challenging behaviour. Foster children may respond quite differently to their foster parents' attempts to correct their behaviour. Likewise parents of children with special health care needs (for instance autism spectrum disorder) may need additional assistance and advice to help correct their behaviour if not acceptable.

There is a growing body of evidence in relation to those parents who rely on corporal punishment and slapping and findings include parental depression (in either mother or father) and a past experience of negative experiences in childhood ⁴.

The evidence is very strong indeed that slapping children is associated with adverse outcomes for the child. If the child is under 18 months, slapping can escalate to causing physical injury and repeated slapping has a wholly negative effect on the parent-child relationship. Slapping is associated with increased aggression in both pre-school and school –aged children, an increased risk of mental health disorders and cognition problems and more oppositional and defiant behaviour in the child. The risk of harsh punishment ⁵ is increased within families who are experiencing economic challenges, mental health issues, substance abuse or intimate partner violence. What is new and most important is the longer term impact of slapping with increased rates of suicide, moderate to heavy drinking and substance abuse in adulthood.

One does not have to slap a child for deleterious effects to be seen as harsh verbal abuse before the age of 13 years is associated with changes on MRI brain scans in adolescence, conduct issues and depressive symptoms. This can thus further escalate harsh verbal abuse towards the adolescent.

What can be done? How should we move away from slapping and other forms of physical punishment? What strategies should we use to promote effective discipline to enable a move away from slapping?

Parents should be advised that slapping is not an effective strategy to alter a child's behaviour and has long-term deleterious effects. For many children, slapping merely increases aggression and anger instead of teaching responsibility and self-control. Parents are capable of seeing the value of 'time outs' to positively modify behaviour in their children. Positive reinforcement should be the primary means of teaching acceptable behaviour. Triple P ⁶ and Healthy Steps ⁷ are excellent examples of an evidence-based parent education programmes especially in managing behavioural issues in under 3 year olds.

Parents and adults caring for children should, I believe, use healthy forms of discipline such as positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviours and limit setting. They should always strive to redirect and set future expectations in the child. They should not use corporal punishment (including hitting and slapping) either in anger or frustration or as a punishment for poor behaviour nor should they use verbal abuse or humiliation. Both have well recognised long-term deleterious effects on the child. Slapping is therefore not necessary, quite ineffective and has long-lasting effects. Having introduced legislation back in 2015, we need to continue to change attitudes and behaviours in parents and caregivers to ensure slapping is no longer considered acceptable in this country.

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