



The positive impact of prohibition of corporal punishment on children’s lives: messages from research

September 2021

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Introduction: children’s right to legal protection from all violent punishment

Children have a right to legal protection from all corporal punishment, in the family home and all other settings of their lives. This human right is recognised under international treaties, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹: states are legally obliged to enact laws to prohibit corporal punishment and to work to raise awareness of and implement these laws.

Legal protection from all violent punishment is key not only to protecting children from violence but also to raising their social status. Laws which allow adults to inflict violence on children in the name of “discipline” represent a view of children as subordinate to adults, possessions of their parents rather than people in their own right. Reforming laws to ensure that children can no longer be lawfully subjected to violent punishment marks a turning point in society’s relationship with children, signalling recognition of children as human beings and rights holders. In enhancing children’s position in society, it advances all their other rights.

Research has made visible the links between “light” corporal punishment and more severe physical violence against children, illuminating how prohibiting corporal punishment is a basic requirement for child protection systems and a key element of preventing all violence against children. The large body of research on the harmful impact of corporal punishment illustrates how prohibiting corporal punishment is essential not only for children’s right to protection from violence, but also for their rights to health, development and education. Details on this research, which can be used to support rights-based advocacy for prohibition, are available in the Global Initiative’s review of research on the impact of and associations with corporal punishment, available at www.endcorporalpunishment.org.

Research is not necessary to “prove” the need for law reform. However, research on the issue can be useful for advocacy, and the message from research is very clear: prohibition, accompanied by government-led population-level measures to raise awareness of and implement the prohibition, is essential in eliminating corporal punishment. This paper summarises research showing reductions in the approval and use of corporal punishment in some countries which have reformed their laws to prohibit all corporal punishment of children.

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006), [*General Comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment \(arts. 19; 28, para. 2; and 37, inter alia\)*](#)

Research showing reductions in the approval and use of violent punishment after prohibition

Progress towards universal prohibition of all corporal punishment is fast accelerating. Almost a quarter of UN member states have now prohibited corporal punishment in all settings including the family home. But research comparing the prevalence of and attitudes towards corporal punishment before and after law reform is available in only a handful of these. In some states, no research has directly asked children about their experiences; in others, different questions or different samples have been used in studies carried out before and after prohibition, making strict comparison between data difficult. Nonetheless, the evidence of changes in attitudes and practice is strong. This section summarises research showing these changes in some countries which have reformed their laws to prohibit all corporal punishment of children.

Sweden

Half of children regularly smacked in 1970s; a few per cent in 2000s.

In 1979, Sweden became the first country in the world to prohibit all corporal punishment of children. The Ministry of Justice ran a large-scale public education campaign about the new law. A brochure entitled “Can You Bring Up Children Successfully without Smacking and Spanking?” was distributed to all households with children, parents received support and information at children’s and antenatal clinics and information about the issue was printed on milk cartons to encourage awareness and discussion in families. These efforts resulted in a very high level of public awareness of the law: in 1981, over 90% of Swedish families were aware of the prohibition on corporal punishment.² Since prohibition, there has been a consistent decline in adult approval and use of physical punishment. In the 1970s, around half of children were smacked regularly; this fell to around a third in the 1980s, and a few per cent after 2000.³

In 2000, studies carried out on behalf of the Parliamentary Committee on Child Abuse and Related Issues found a marked change in parental support for corporal punishment: from 53% in 1965 to 10% in 1999. The studies involved interviews with parents of 1,609 children, a nationwide classroom questionnaire completed by 1,764 children aged 11-13 years and a nationwide postal survey completed by 1,576 20 year-olds.⁴ In a 2010 study which involved interviews with around 4,000 mothers, fathers and children aged 7-10 in China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand and the US, Sweden was the only country in which none of the

² Modig, C. (2009), *Never Violence – Thirty Years on from Sweden’s Abolition of Corporal Punishment*, Save the Children Sweden and Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

³ Modig, C. (2009), op cit

⁴ Janson, S. (2000), *Children and abuse - corporal punishment and other forms of child abuse in Sweden at the end of the second millennium: A scientific report prepared for the Committee on Child Abuse and Related Issues*, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

parents involved believed it was necessary to use corporal punishment to bring up their child.⁵ Research in 2011 with more than 1,500 12-16 year olds found that 83.8% disagreed that “parents have a right to use mild forms of corporal punishment on their children (e.g. smacking)” and 93.6% agreed that “children must be protected from all forms of violence”.⁶

A 2000 study which examined the impact of the ban found that reporting of assaults against children rose between 1981 and 1996, in line with expectations of a reduced tolerance of violence against children following the ban. The vast majority of reported assaults were in the most minor assault category, punishable by a fine, suggesting that children at risk of violence were being identified before serious injury occurred. The study found that social care interventions were increasingly supportive of families, with the proportion of interventions involving out-of-home care decreasing by a third. It also found a decrease in the number of 15-17 year olds involved in various types of crime, including theft, narcotics crimes, assaults against young children and rape, between 1983 and 1996 and a decrease in suicide and use of alcohol and drugs by young people between 1971 and 1997.⁷

A study published in 2014 which examined changes in authoritarian parenting practices and family roles in Sweden over 53 years using data from 3 cohorts (1958, 1981, and 2011) of young to middle-aged adults found a dramatic decrease in participants reporting having been slapped during childhood. There was no significant difference between the experience of physical punishment of participants in the 1958 and 1981 cohorts, but participants in the 2011 cohort were much less likely than those in the 1981 cohort to report having been slapped during childhood. In 1958, 20% of participants said that they were often slapped by their parents; in 1981, the figure was 18% but by 2011 it had decreased to 2%. In 1958, 17% of participants said that their parents had never slapped them; by 2011, the figure had risen to 77%. Over the 53 years, the likelihood of participants having been slapped by their parents decreased by 93%; between 1981 and 2011, the decrease was 92%. The study also found evidence of an overall decline in authoritarian parenting practices and a move towards egalitarian family environments between 1981 and 2011.⁸

⁵ Lansford, J. et al (2010), “Corporal Punishment of Children in Nine Countries as a Function of Child Gender and Parent Gender”, *International Journal of Pediatrics*

⁶ UNICEF (2011), *Nordic Study on Child Rights to Participate 2009-2010*, Innolink Research

⁷ Durrant, J. (2000), *A Generation Without Smacking: the impact of Sweden’s ban on physical punishment*, Save the Children

⁸ Trifan, T. A. et al (2014), “Have Authoritarian Parenting Practices and Roles Changed in the Last 50 Years?”, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76: 744–761

Finland

Decline in adult acceptance of corporal punishment from 47% in 1981 to 15% in 2014.

Finland's 1983 prohibition of corporal punishment was accompanied by a public education campaign. Government efforts to eliminate all corporal punishment continue through the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health's 2010-2015 action plan to reduce corporal punishment of children, *Don't Hit the Child*.⁹ The action plan aims to continue and accelerate the progress made, focussing particularly on reducing corporal punishment of groups of children who are particularly likely to experience it (including young children, children with disabilities and children of immigrant families). The views of almost 400 children were considered in developing the plan, which proposes to increase support for parents, provide education on children's rights to relevant professionals and provide information for children at school and online. There is a high level of awareness of prohibition: a 2012 survey found that 97% of parents knew corporal punishment was prohibited.¹⁰

Since prohibition, there have been dramatic declines in the prevalence of corporal punishment. A major 2008 study on violence against children published by the Police College of Finland involved over 13,000 children aged 12-15 and was designed to allow direct comparison with research on the topic carried out in 1988. In 1988, around a quarter of children had been "smacked" before age 14, and around two thirds had had their hair pulled. In 2008, around 10% had been "smacked" and around a third had had their hair pulled. The overall percentage of children who had experienced "mild" punitive violence from their parents declined from 72% in 1988 to 32% in 2008; the percentage of children who had experienced severe punitive violence dropped from 8% to 4%. There was a clear reduction in all forms of corporal punishment and other parental violence against children in the past twenty years, with the most significant reduction in the "relatively mild forms of violence previously considered socially acceptable types of corporal punishment" (p. 160).¹¹ A 2012 study, again by the Police College, involved more than 3,000 parents of children aged under 13 and found that less than 1% of parents reported hitting their children with an object, punching them or kicking them.¹²

Adult approval of corporal punishment has declined since prohibition. A series of six nationally representative surveys carried out by the National Institute of Legal Policy, Central Union for Child

⁹ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2011), *Don't hit the child! National Action Plan to Reduce Corporal Punishment of Children 2010–2015*, Helsinki: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

¹⁰ Central Union for Child Welfare (2012), *Attitudes to disciplinary violence*, Finland: Central Union for Child Welfare & Taloustutkimus Oy

¹¹ Ellonen, N. et al(2008), *Lasten ja nuorten väkivaltakokemukset. Tutkimus peruskoulun 6. - 9. luokan oppilaiden kokemasta väkivallasta*, Poliisiammattikorkeakoulun Raportteja 71/2008

¹² Ellonen, N. (2012), *Kurin alaiset : lasten ja vanhempien välisten ristiriitojen ratkaiseminen perheissä*, Tampere : Poliisiammattikorkeakoulu

Welfare and research company Taloustutkimus between 1981 and 2012 show a consistent decline in adult acceptance of corporal punishment: from 47% in 1981 to 15% in 2014.¹³

A study carried out in 2011 and published in 2014, which involved a survey of a representative sample of 4,609 15-80 year olds from Western Finland, found that the proportion of people who were slapped and beaten with an object during childhood decreased after corporal punishment was prohibited in 1983. The study found that experience of corporal punishment was associated with reporting indications of alcohol abuse, depression, mental health problems, and schizotypal personality and with having attempted suicide in the past year. The study examined the survey data in relation to data on murders of children and found that the decline in physical punishment was associated with a similar decline in the number of children who were murdered.¹⁴

Austria

Prohibition was achieved in 1989. A 2013 study found that 18-29 year olds, who grew up mostly after prohibition, were less likely to have been slapped or smacked on the bottom by their parents than people over the age of 30.¹⁵

Germany

In 1992, 30% of young people had been “thrashed”; by 2002, the figure was 3%.

Germany’s 2000 prohibition was accompanied by a 15-month nationwide awareness-raising campaign, “More Respect For Children”, run by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. The campaign included billboard and television posters and events, including street parties, theatre presentations, lectures and seminars which were covered in the press and on television and radio. A longitudinal study carried out in Germany from 1996 to 2007 showed that the number of German parents believing corporal punishment is legally admissible declined for almost all forms of corporal punishment throughout this time. For example in 1996, 83% of parents surveyed believed a “mild slap on the face” was legally admissible, but by 2008, 25% of parents thought so.¹⁶

In 2001, the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Ministry for Justice instituted a research programme to study the reception and initial effects of the reform.

¹³ Sariola, H. (2012), Violence against children and child sexual abuse in Finland, presentation given at the Central Union for Child Welfare, Helsinki 30 August 2012; Central Union for Child Welfare (2012), Attitudes to disciplinary violence, Finland: Central Union for Child Welfare & Taloustutkimus Oy; reported by Central Union for Child Welfare, 9 April 2014

¹⁴ Österman, K. et al (2014) “Twenty-Eight Years After the Complete Ban on the Physical Punishment of Children in Finland: Trends and Psychosocial Concomitants”, *Aggressive Behaviour*, 9999, 1-14

¹⁵ Spectra Marktforschung (2013), *Gewaltverbot in der Erziehung: trendmessung zu 2009*

¹⁶ Bussmann, K. D. (2009), *The Effect of Banning Corporal Punishment in Europe: A Five-Nation Comparison*, Halle-Wittenberg: Martin-Luther-Universität

Research undertaken in 2001 and published in 2003, which involved interviews with 3,000 parents and 2,000 12-18 year olds, found that in comparison with previous studies there had been a decrease in corporal punishment of all degrees of severity. For example, in 1996 a third of parents (33.2%) reported they had hit their child's bottom, compared with just over a quarter (26.4%) in 2001. In 1992, 30% of young people (aged over 11) reported they had been "thrashed," while in 2002, 3% of young people reported this.¹⁷

A 2011 study which involved 9,500 16-40 year olds found that 52% of respondents had not been physically punished in childhood. This proportion had doubled since a similar study in 1992, when the figure was 26%. Younger people were most likely to have never been physically punished: 63% of 16-20 year olds reported this. The proportion of people who had experienced "light" violence in childhood decreased significantly: from 58% in 1992 to 36% in 2011. The decrease in violent punishment of children has been linked to decreases in violence by young people in school and elsewhere and to reductions in the proportion of women experiencing physical injury due to domestic violence.¹⁸

New Zealand

Rate of approval of corporal punishment down from more than 90% in 1981 to 40% in 2013.

Prohibition of all corporal punishment was achieved in 2007. A 2008 survey involving a nationally representative sample of 750 adults found a high awareness of the law change (91%) and found that attitudes and knowledge of the law had changed even in the one-year period since its introduction.¹⁹ A 2013 survey which used questions and a methodology comparable to the 2008 survey and earlier studies confirmed that acceptance of physical punishment of children was declining steadily. In 2013, 40% of respondents thought it was sometimes alright for parents to physically punish children, compared to 58% in 2008, more than 80% in 1993 and more than 90% in 1981. The proportion of parents with children under 18 who thought it was alright to use physical punishment with children fell from 62% in 2008 to 35% in 2013.²⁰ A 2012 poll of 500 parents of children aged under 12 found that 44% had not smacked their children since the 2007 law change which prohibited all corporal punishment of children. Twenty-nine per cent said they had smacked "rarely", 21% "occasionally" and 1% "frequently".²¹ This contrasts with a 1997 study

¹⁷ Federal Ministry of Justice & Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2003), *Violence in upbringing: An assessment after the introduction of the right to a non-violent upbringing*

¹⁸ Pfeiffer, C. (2012), "Weniger Hiebe, mehr Liebe. Der Wandel familiärer Erziehung in Deutschland", *Centaur*, 11 (2), 14-17, cited in Pfeiffer, C. (2013), *Parallel Justice – Why Do We Need Stronger Support for the Victim in Society?*, Address at the closing plenary session of the 18th German Congress on Crime Prevention, April 23, 2013

¹⁹ UMR Research (2008), *Omnibus Survey Report: One year on: Public attitudes and New Zealand's child discipline law*, Office of the Children's Commissioner

²⁰ Wood, B. (2013), *Physical punishment of children in New Zealand – six years after law reform*, EPOCH New Zealand

²¹ Reported in *New Zealand Herald*, 2 April 2012

in which 1,025 18 year olds were asked about their recall of punishment before the age of 16 years, and which found that nine out of ten had been physically punished. More than half (56.4%) reported regular frequent smacking, 30.8% regular hitting on the head or body with fists and 29.5% regular hitting with a cane, strap or similar object.²²

In response to public anxieties about possible prosecutions of parents for “light smacking”, when the ban was being introduced the Government undertook to ask the police to collect data on their responses to cases of parental physical punishment. The New Zealand Police Force produced eleven reviews of police activity between the prohibition of all corporal punishment of children in June 2007 and the end of 2012. The final review confirmed that a very small number of parents had been prosecuted: in the first 5 years after the law change, police attended a total of 143 incidents of “smacking”, of which eight were prosecuted. In all the other cases, a warning was given or no further action was taken by the police; in many cases parents were referred to support services.²³ A 2009 study by the Ministry for Social Development which used police data and data from the government agency responsible for child protection confirmed that there had been no evidence of disproportionate state interference in childrearing, including unwarranted investigation or prosecution for light smacking, since prohibition.²⁴

Romania

Full prohibition was achieved in 2004. A 2012 study found that fewer children reported experiencing corporal punishment from their parents than in a similar study carried out in 2001. In 2001, 84% of children said their parents hit them with a hand without leaving a mark; by 2012, this had fallen to 62%. In 2001, 29% of children reported being hit with objects by their parents and 10% being hit so hard it left a mark. By 2012 these figures had fallen to 18% and 5% respectively. The study also found a decrease in parents’ use of verbal abuse: 22% of children reported experiencing this in 2001, compared to 16% in 2012.²⁵

Poland

Approval of corporal punishment fell by 18% in five years.

Successive studies carried out on behalf of the Ombudsman’s office, each involving around 1,000 residents of Poland aged 15-75, found decreases in the social acceptance of parents hitting

²² Fergusson, D.M. & Lynskey, M.T. (1997), “Physical punishment/maltreatment during childhood and adjustment in young adulthood”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 21(7), 617-630

²³ New Zealand Police (2013), *Eleventh review of police activity since enactment of the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007*

²⁴ Hughes, P. (2009), *Report to the Minister for Social Development and Employment*, Wellington: Ministry for Social Development

²⁵ Save the Children Romania (2014), *Child Neglect and Abuse: National Sociologic Study* (English summary), Save the Children & Child Protection Department, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly

children since the achievement of full prohibition in 2010. In 2013, 60% of respondents agreed that “there are situations when a child needs to be smacked”, compared to 68% in 2012, 69% in 2011 and 78% in 2008. In 2013, 33% disagreed with the statement, compared to 29% in 2012, 27% in 2011 and 19% in 2008.²⁶ A comparison of research carried out in 1994 and 2008 did not reveal similar decreases in public approval of corporal punishment, suggesting that law reform and accompanying public education activities had an impact on public opinion.

The 2011 study showed a high rate of awareness of the law: 74% of respondents agreed that “beating of a child is unlawful”.²⁷ In 2013, 45% thought the prohibition of corporal punishment was right and would have positive effects.

Comparative research

Research comparing countries which have prohibited all corporal punishment and those which have not can show the effects of prohibition. A 1999 study of more than 10,000 people aged over 24 in 208 cities in 14 EU countries found that in states which had prohibited all corporal punishment, the average level of acceptance of physical punishment was lower than in states where corporal punishment was not prohibited. States with lower levels of acceptability of physical punishment of children had lower rates of deaths of children caused by “maltreatment”.²⁸

In a study carried out between October and December 2007, 5,000 parents were interviewed across five European countries: **Sweden, Austria and Germany**, which have prohibited corporal punishment, and **France and Spain** which had not prohibited corporal punishment at the time of the study (Spain prohibited all corporal punishment in December 2007). The study found that nearly all forms of corporal punishment were used significantly less in countries which had prohibited than in those where corporal punishment was still lawful. For example, while over half of parents in France and Spain had “spanked” their child’s bottom, only 4% of parents in Sweden and around 17% of parents in Austria and Germany had done so. Nearly half the parents in Spain and France had used severe corporal punishment (a resounding slap on the face, beating with an object or severe beating) on more than one occasion, compared with 14% of parents in Austria and Germany and 3.4% of parents in Sweden. Parents in nations where corporal punishment was prohibited at the time of the study showed lower acceptance of justifications for corporal punishment: 20% of parents in Spain and 27% of parents in France agreed that “a slap on the face is sometimes the best/quickest way to deal with a situation”, compared with 15% of parents in Germany, 13% of parents in Austria, and 4% of parents in Sweden. The study concluded that that “there can no longer be any doubt about the violence-reducing effect of a ban on childrearing violence” (p.20).²⁹ Similarly, a 2002 study of the countries which had prohibited corporal

²⁶ Ombudsman for Children (2013), *Annual Report of the Ombudsman for Children of the Republic of Poland for 2013*, Warsaw: Office of the Ombudsman for Children

²⁷ TNS OBOP (2011), *Social resonance of the amendment to the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence*, Ombudsman for Children of the Republic of Poland

²⁸ Gracia, E. & Herrero, J. (2008), “Is It Considered Violence? The Acceptability of Physical Punishment of Children in Europe”, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70: 210–217

²⁹ Bussmann, K. D. (2009), op cit

punishment at the time (**Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Latvia, Croatia, Israel and Germany**) found that public education which is not underpinned by legal reform has limited success, but public education coupled with law reform can lead to significant shifts in attitudes and behaviours.³⁰

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³⁰ Boyson, R. (2002), *Equal Protection for Children: An overview of the experience of countries that accord children full protection from physical punishment*, London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children