Nonviolent Childrearing

Their place was like an art gallery – tapestries on the dining room walls, sculptures in niches. Eric ran his hand over a sensuous marble form, delighting in the sensation. His host, Mervyn, glided behind him.

“I’d rather you didn’t touch it, Eric, if you don’t mind. Muddies the surface.”

Eric withdrew his hand, but slowly, lingering further over the planes.

Mervyn was beside him in an instant, grabbing Eric’s arm.

“I said, don’t touch it. Are you deaf?” Mervyn raised his hand and brought it down on Eric’s buttocks. He hit him three times. “Perhaps this will help you remember next time.”

Janis ran in. “Mervyn, what on earth are you doing? You’re being utterly unreasonable. Eric was doing no harm.” She stopped nervously before her husband, who stood motionless, glaring at her. He turned, walked over to a rack of ornately carved walking sticks, selected one no thicker than a man’s thumb, and struck Janis repeatedly across the back. “I’ve been clear about this issue before, Janis; you were asking for this.”

A waitress, carrying a tray of hors d’oeuvres, hesitated at the door. Mervyn and Janis instantly composed themselves. Janis inspected the tray, then looked up, furious.

“These were to have been served on Melba toast, not crackers. Do you never listen?” She grabbed the woman’s shoulder, shook her, and slapped her bare arm hard and repeatedly.

Eric escaped to the balcony, where knots of other guests were drinking and enjoying the view. He spotted one of his assistants from the office. “Hey man,” he said. “How’s it going? I’m looking forward to that report on my desk tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, no, Eric,” the man looked horrified. “Was it tomorrow? I thought I had until next week.”

“Look, guy, this hurts me as much as it hurts you. Pull down your pants and bend over, and if you use language like that again, I’ll be washing your mouth out with soap.”

Physical Punishment

The above scenario is preposterous because all the players are adults. On the whole, adults do not behave this way. However, if transposed to the lives of adult-child relationships, it illustrates more or less common-place uses of violent physical punishment. The use of a stick would be regarded as child abuse in many but not all countries; the other events would be seen as allowable physical punishment if administered by parents to children in most countries. In the development of the right to security of person, children are the last of society’s low-status groups to gain the right not to be assaulted as punishment. Progressively, wives, servants, apprentices, low-ranking military men (in some countries), prisoners (in some countries) have gained the right not to be assaulted. Children have been given this right in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Latvia, Croatia, Israel, Germany, Bulgaria, Iceland, Ukraine and Romania, the latter enacting the right in Parliament as recently as June 2004 (1).

Notable absences from this group are UK, USA and Canada. The use of physical punishment on children is incompatible with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The implementing committee of the latter has specifically re-
quested that noncompliant countries bring their legislation into line with this important instrument (1). The European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe have also taken a position against all physical punishment of children.

**What Has This to Do with Medicine and Peace?**

Violent punishment of children fits easily into the definition of peace as a relationship between entities in which no harm is being done (minimal) and there is mutual benefit through cooperation (maximal). The issue concerns health workers in several ways. Most immediately, health workers treat children who have obviously been physically or mentally harmed by harsh physical punishment. Contrary to some claims, there is no category of “child abuse” distinguishable from physical punishment. There is a seamless continuum from minimum to maximum in severity of assault and harm done. Most episodes of “child abuse” are attempts at correction of undesired behavior, such as shaking a baby to stop its crying.

**How Does Physical Punishment Harm Children?**

There is widespread acknowledgement that harsh forms of punishment that leave marks or injuries on children do harm. It is less widely understood that there is an accumulation of evidence suggesting that less harsh physical punishment also harms children. Much of the evidence is correlational and does not permit certain causal attribution. Elizabeth Gershoff reviewed 88 studies of behaviors and experiences associated with physical punishment in childhood (2). She found that physical punishment correlates with immediate compliance by the child; likelihood of injury from punishment episodes; impairment of the parent-child relationship; impairment of moral development in the child, with failure of internalization of principles; aggressive behavior, including later aggression in romantic relationships and spousal abuse; other antisocial behavior (lying, stealing); child mental health, such as anxiety, depression, and hopelessness; and greater subsequent adult tolerance of violent punishment of children.

Research on longer-term effects of physical punishment shows association with anxiety, antisocial behaviors and alcohol abuse, and dependence in adulthood (3).

**Social Response to Evidence and to Statement of Children’s Rights**

Sectors of communities with an interest in children’s rights respond in a number of ways. They issue position statements opposing physical punishment of children. In particular national pediatric associations have featured prominently in this action. There is a lengthening list of such endorsements. This is often accompanied by public education efforts conveying alternative methods of parental guidance of children. National and regional legislation forbidding physical punishment in schools has been growing in prevalence since the 1920s, and finally legislation forbidding it in families is increasing. Even in a jurisdiction such as Canada, where it is legally permitted to assault a child for reasons of discipline, Supreme Court interpretation has limited its use in terms of who can do it (parents only), at what age (children 2-13 years only), on what parts of the child’s body (not the head), with what (no objects), the emotional state of the parent (not in anger), and the degree of force (“minor corrective force of a transitory and trifling nature”).

Resistance to this change is led by a US organization called Focus on the Family whose literature holds that “spanking can be a valuable disciplinary tool” for children between 7 months and teen age, recommends the use of a switch or paddle, and suggests that if a child has not stopped crying five minutes after a spanking, more spanking should be done (4). A more credible challenge has been made on the basis that most of the many studies used as evidence for the ill-effects of physical discipline are correlational, and not designed to show causal linkages (5).

**Nonviolent Childrearing?**

Does the progression above represent a moral evolution, from the idea of child as chattel of the father, disposable by death by decree of the father in certain circumstances; to the child as possessor of rights, including security of person and protection from assault?

Strictly speaking, the rights-based approach to this problem need not rely on evidence. It is based on concepts of human dignity and equality. In practice, the use of rights arguments is intertwined with the use of evidence by those proposing to ban physical punishment. If this cultural
change proceeds, as seems likely, it will become very important to implement the recommendations of many of the endorsing professional bodies for universal parenting education. “Time-out” is a strategy that appears to be moving from the realm of expert knowledge to common parenting culture, but knowledge and skill with a larger range of alternatives to physical punishment are needed by ordinary parents. Further emphasis on parenting education for young people at high school is likely to be helpful. Parents immigrating from countries with high tolerance for physical discipline to ones of low tolerance need help in understanding alternatives to physical punishment and their new country’s laws about treatment of children.

Perhaps this cultural change really can claim to represent a moral evolution – towards more dignity and less violence in human relationships. And those in the health sector who contribute to this change are promoting peace in the most fundamental of all relationships.

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References