

# Reducing Corporal Punishment in Seychelles

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## 1. Introduction

There are three potential responses available to an adult in the face of undesired behaviour by a child. A nonviolent response might use explanation or the withdrawal of privileges; a psychologically aggressive response might include yelling and threats; and a physically violent approach might involve slapping or beating the child with a belt or stick. These responses are not mutually exclusive and one response can quickly turn into another. This article focuses on the third of these – the use of physical violence by teachers and parents.

The aims of the article are to discuss the reasons why corporal punishment is commonly used and why there is resistance to efforts to curtail its use; to examine the scientific evidence concerning its effects on children during childhood and when they become adults; to examine some alternative forms of discipline which can be used at home and at school; and, in the light of the above, to reflect on the efforts to curtail its use in Seychelles.

Two important preliminary points need to be made. First, the corporal punishment discussed in this article and the research it reports is not the draconian punishment inflicted by psychopaths. It is ‘ordinary corporal punishment’ as approved of and practiced by parents worldwide. Supporters of corporal punishment argue that there is a clear distinction between punishment to control and correct a child and physical abuse but ordinary corporal punishment can easily turn into abuse. However, Durrant (2005, p. 50) cautions that corporal punishment and physical abuse lie on ‘... a continuum of violence and that is not possible to draw a line that distinguishes where punishment ends and abuse begins’.

Second, the use of corporal punishment reinforces the use of violence throughout a society as an acceptable way of dealing with the inevitable conflicts which arise. It thereby contributes to a wider culture of violence in homes, institutions and communities. In his book *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, Robin Grille provides persuasive evidence that ‘the collective childhood experience of a society is probably the single most important factor driving group decisions made at political, business and social levels’ (2005, p. 100). In the early 1900s, for example, the German model of child-rearing emphasized rigorous obedience training and minimal demonstrations of affection from infancy onwards. Grille argues that it was ‘this kind of childhood atmosphere ... taken to extremes, [that] gave rise to the hatred, the lack of compassion and the blind obedience

that comprised the engine of the Nazi phenomenon' (2005, p. 120). In case this is regarded as too extreme an example, Grille also provides data from major studies of parenting styles in rural Yugoslavia during the 1930s, in Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in various religious groups, and in 20<sup>th</sup> century democracies such as France, the US and Sweden (Grille, 2005, pp. 99-174).

In 1979, Sweden became the first country to prohibit corporal punishment in both homes and schools and there have been ongoing and effective efforts to curtail corporal punishment since then. These efforts were strengthened by the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Over 130 countries now prohibit corporal punishment in schools, including all European countries and most of South America and East Asia. A number of countries no longer allow parenthood or guardianship as a legal defence for using corporal punishment and this has been followed in some by outright bans on the practice. However, it remains legal in the majority of countries.

## 2. Reasons for the persistence of corporal punishment

This section briefly identifies three foundations of the current practice of corporal punishment and its persistence. First, the use of corporal punishment is a learned behaviour and parents and teachers who have experienced corporal punishment earlier in their lives are very likely to use it themselves in their classrooms and homes. The theoretical explanation of this is social learning theory, as developed by Albert Bandura (1977), which posits that people observe, experience and then imitate the behaviour of others. Unless an individual chooses to act differently, it is likely that they will discipline their children or learners in the way they were themselves disciplined.

Second, much corporal punishment is not a result of careful consideration; rather, it results from a loss of temper combined with the desire for a quick fix. This may be linked with limited conflict management and conflict resolution skills on the part of parents and teachers.

Third, there are a number of strongly held beliefs which support the use of corporal punishment, including its effectiveness in bringing up 'good' children and later adults; that failure to use corporal punishment will result in anti-social children who reject authority of any kind; that corporal punishment has few if any negative effects; that religion supports its use; and that there are no realistic alternatives available, or at least any which can deal with a particular behaviour more or less immediately. The validity of a number of these beliefs are examined later in this article.

### 3. The effects of corporal punishment

It is widely believed that corporal punishment is effective and necessary in order to bring up good children but what is the evidence?

It is essential that decisions to support or outlaw corporal punished are based on 'science' rather than personal experience. Many individuals will justify their use of corporal punishment on their own experience as a child. The logic is that 'I was belted when I was a boy and I turned out all right' [so it's OK for me to use it]'. Such anecdotal evidence is not an adequate basis for personal behaviour, let alone national policy. We now turn to the scientific evidence, by which is meant properly conducted research studies which have gone through a peer review process.

A meta-analysis of 88 such studies has been carried out by Gershoff (2002) and its findings have been confirmed by subsequent research (e.g. Gershoff, 2010). It is necessary to explain how these studies are carried out. The ideal way of establishing the outcome of an action or intervention is to use a randomised control trial (RCT). That is, a researcher takes two very similar groups of people and measures them, say on some health indicator, before any intervention takes place; the expectation being that the groups will have quite similar scores. One group then becomes the experimental group, to which an intervention (e.g. a drug) is applied while the other (the control group) continues as before. After an appropriate time, the two groups are measured again. If the health indicator has improved in the experimental group and not in the control group, this would be evidence of the efficacy of the drug.

The research on the relationship between corporal punishment cannot follow an RCT approach for ethical reasons. A researcher cannot take two similar groups of parents and require one group to use corporal punishment while parents in the other group may not. Nor can a sample of children be somehow allocated among parents who use corporal punishment and those who do not. Therefore, the research on corporal punishment uses a correlational approach, which compares individuals who were subject to corporal punishment with those who were not in terms of various developmental indicators. Precisely the same approach is used in studies which investigate the effects of smoking on various forms of cancer by comparing the incidence of cancer among those who smoke and those who do not.

The following table summarises studies of the outcomes of 'ordinary' corporal punishment during childhood and into adulthood. The first column lists the number of studies from the 88 which examined the relationship between corporal punishment and 11 development indicators (many studies examined more than one indicator), while the second column indicates how many of these studies found a significant positive relationship between the use of ordinary corporal punishment and indicator. For example, there were 27 studies which examined whether corporal punishment was

associated with more aggression in childhood; all 27 studies found that this was the case. And four studies examined whether receiving corporal punishment as a child was associated with more aggression when they became adults; all four studies found this to be the case.

	Studies examining	Studies confirming
<b>Outcomes during childhood</b>		
More aggression as children	27	27
Child victim of physical abuse	10	10
More antisocial behaviour as children	13	12
Poorer mental health as children	12	12
Impaired parent-child relationship	13	13
Higher levels of immediate compliance	5	5
<b>Outcomes during adulthood</b>		
Poorer mental health	8	8
Lower moral internalization	15	13
More aggression	4	4
More antisocial behaviour	5	5
More abuse of own children or spouse	5	5

*Table 1. Outcomes of ordinary corporal punishment*  
 (Source: Gershoff (2002), as summarised by Durrant (2005, p. 64)

It is important to correctly interpret the science presented in the table. It is not saying that every child who experiences corporal punishment will become an aggressive individual. It is saying, however, that the chances of such an outcome is higher if a child is subject to corporal punishment. In the same vein, many smokers never contract cancer but very few people now doubt that smoking increases the chances of contracting it.

In summary, the table documents overwhelming evidence of the negative effects of corporal punishment during childhood and into adulthood. Rather than producing 'good' children and adults, the use of corporal punishment results in more aggressive and

less emotionally healthy individuals, whose relationships with their parents is impaired. The only positive outcome, if it can be called that, is higher levels of immediate compliance to parental directions. Science tells us irrefutably that corporal punishment is harmful and should not be used.

These effects are not confined to the families concerned. Wider society has to bear the costs of aggression and anti-social behaviour which are the consequences of corporal punishment. If it was to be largely replaced by nonviolent forms of discipline, the impact within a generation would be a less aggressive, less violent society. This point cannot be stressed too greatly.

Supporters of corporal punishment may raise several objections to the above interpretation. One is that the 88 studies were almost all carried out in North America and the findings might not apply to other countries where corporal punishment is part of cultural practice. An initial comment is that corporal punishment, along with many other types of violence, was practiced in the vast majority of cultures. However, in many countries, the acceptability of such practices has changed, especially over the last half century.

It is true that very few studies of the effects of corporal punishment have been carried out in developing countries, but two studies provide at least partial answers to the objection. The first examines whether the association between corporal punishment and children's aggressive and antisocial behaviours applies across various race-ethnic groups in the United States. A review of the evidence (Gershoff 2010, pp. 52-53) indicates that there is no race-ethnic difference: '... corporal punishment predicts increases in children's aggressive and antisocial behaviours equally across African-American, Hispanic-American, European-American and Asian-American race-ethnic groups.'

Second, there is the research of Jennifer Lansford et al. (2005) which investigated the effects of corporal punishment outside North America (in China, India, Italy, Kenya, the Philippines, and Thailand) and whether these effects differed in societies where it was more widely accepted. More frequent corporal punishment was found to be related to higher levels of child aggression and anxiety in all six countries, although the association was weaker in countries in which the use of corporal punishment was more normative.

Another objection concerns the risks involved in not using corporal punishment. The fear is that without corporal punishment to keep them in check, children will rebel against their parents and authority in general which will in due course result in violent and anarchic societies. This assumes that corporal punishment is not replaced by effective alternative forms of discipline. It must be accepted that this might happen in individual households but the question is whether it is likely to happen in so many as to produce a national effect. The experience of countries which have abolished corporal punishment can help shed light on this assumption. The first country to abolish corporal

punishment in homes and schools was Sweden in 1979. The best indicator of interpersonal violence is the homicide rate per 100 000 of population. In 2018, Sweden had a homicide rate of 1.08, which has hardly changed since 1979; this compares with a current world rate of 5.8. For comparison, the rates for Seychelles, South Africa and the United States were 12.7, 36.4 and 5.0 respectively (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

In addition, in the various international indexes of societal wellbeing (e.g. the Human Development Index, the Human Freedom Index, the World Happiness Index, and the World Peace Index), Sweden always ranks in the top ten countries and normally in the top five. It is invariably accompanied in these rankings by the other Scandinavian countries which were also among the first countries to abolish corporal punishment. In these countries, the abolition of corporal punishment has not resulted in societal disintegration and I am not aware of any countries where there is evidence to this effect.

#### 4. Alternatives to corporal punishment

It is often thought that there is little choice open to parents and teachers who want to maintain a degree of discipline in their homes and classrooms. In this section, I report two studies which examine the use of 'restorative discipline practices', which stand in contrast to the retributive discipline approach on which corporal punishment is based.

Restorative justice focuses on the relationship between the parties involved rather than the misdemeanour. In the criminal justice system, restorative approaches focus on building a sense of personal responsibility and self-worth among offenders, and often involves efforts to build or rebuild the relationship between offenders and their victims (Zehr, 2015). This may occur through victim-offender mediation sessions where stories can be told and heard, apologies made and forgiveness asked for and given.

##### *Alternative discipline in the home – communication based on improved parent-child relationships*

Refugee mothers are likely to face particular stresses, including an unwelcoming local population, economic hardship, isolation and a lack of support from their wider family and community. It would not be surprising if they took some of this stress out in their child discipline practices. Umubyeyi and Harris (2012) found that the use of corporal punishment by refugee mothers in Durban, South Africa was widespread, frequent, harsh, and carried out in anger. Subsequently working with 16 mothers, Umubyeyi found that the mothers defended its use as the only way of making their children comply with their wishes. As the conversations continued, however, it became clear that they did not like themselves for the way they treated their children but felt powerless and saw no alternative.

Following a participatory action research approach, Umubyeyi did not force opinions on the participants or provide alternatives. As the mothers talked in several workshops, they became aware that corporal punishment was violent and that they wanted to find an alternative. It also became apparent to them that they were putting little time or effort into building relationships with their children and that this was a key issue. A consensus emerged that if they were able to work at building relationships by increasing day by day communication with their children, then the need for discipline would be reduced. And when it did arise, they believed that the improved relationship would provide a foundation from which to discuss behavioural issues with their children and to find solutions.

All of the participants were committed church members and many referred to verses in the book of Proverbs (13.24, 22.15 and 23.13-14) which are typically summarized as 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. For some mothers, this was almost the end of the discussion but a minority asked: 'What would Jesus say [about child discipline]?' and this second approach gained strength during the workshops.

In a follow up, one month after the workshops, most of the participants reported changed attitudes on their part concerning the disciplining of their children and a determination to act differently. Typical responses included the following (from different mothers):

*I did not think that beating your own child was a problem or that it has an impact on the child. I usually thought that corporal punishment is the only way we can as parents make children do things that we want, but after [the training], I went home and discussed with my husband. I discovered that corporal punishment is violence.*

*You see, I have children who do not understand, especially the boy child. You cannot tell him to do this and do that [because] he just does something else. From the day of the training, I started applying some of the skills presented.*

(Umubyeyi and Harris, 2012, p. 464)

Of course, the real impact of the workshops will only become obvious in the weeks, months and years ahead.

#### ***Alternative discipline in schools – peer mediation and peacemaking circles***

A number of African countries (e.g. South Africa in 1996 and Zimbabwe in 2017) have banned the use of corporal punishment by teachers on the grounds that it represents assault. At the same time, there has been little or nothing suggested by way of alternative discipline methods and no training in such methods.

Restorative practices in schools are based on similar foundational principles to those used in criminal justice which acknowledge the central importance of positive relationships.

Restorative practices aim to promote accountability and responsibility among learners and thereby help to create a conducive learning environment. Restorative practices assist students to learn from their mistakes through encounters with their peers; as a result, friendships can be rebuilt and new relationships created. Restorative language helps to improve emotional literacy for both teachers and pupils and nurtures respect, responsibility and empathy within the members of the school community.

Restorative approaches can be applied by any teacher at any school to any group of children. These approaches are not a 'soft option' for offenders; they involve the difficult work of holding learners accountable for their actions and helping them to understand the impact of their behaviour. Restorative practice can produce a calmer school environment where learners feel they have a voice. The present research utilized two restorative approaches – peer mediation and peacemaking circles – the first of which is discussed in greater detail.

Mediation of conflicts involves a neutral party who guides a process to assist the parties to a conflict to reach a mutually satisfying outcome. Peer mediation is a process of conflict resolution facilitated by learners, with dialogue as its key tool. A number of studies (e.g. Sellman, 2008; Liebmann, 2010; Baruch Bush and Folger, 2013) have found that peer mediation can be learned and practiced by learners as young as eight years. Typically, peer mediators work in pairs under the broad supervision of a teacher and handle conflicts which occur outside classrooms.

Community meetings are commonly used in African communities to deal with conflicts, anti-social behaviours, or other threats to community cohesion. Participants are normally seated in a circle so that all faces can be seen and all contributions heard. Any member of the community is entitled to speak and this is facilitated by the use of a 'talking stick' or similar object, the holder of which is listened to respectfully before it is passed on to another speaker.

In school contexts, peacemaking circles can take the form of checking-in circles that allows the class to know any issue of concern before they start engaging with their day's activities and/or they can be used to address matters of concern to members of the class, including conflicts. In either case, all class members have an opportunity to make a contribution which the other participants treat with respect (Pranis, 2005, 2013; Boyes-Watson, 2005; Boyes-Watson and Pranis, 2010). The circle process emphasizes the communal aspect of individual experiences and communal responsibility for decisions. It can develop active listening, empathy, cooperation, negotiation and the appreciation of diversity (Morrison, 2011, p. 38).

A research project in three primary schools in Harare, Zimbabwe (Chiramba and Harris, 2020) involved training 35 peer mediators and engaging around 200 nine to ten year olds in peacemaking circles over a seven month period. Interviews were carried out with

twelve teachers following the intervention. In terms of the peer mediation, most reported a small but noticeable improvement in the way learners interacted with each other. Playground conflicts, they said, were less likely to become violent and turn into long running feuds. The intervention, even though directed at one grade, seemed to have injected something fresh into each school – a way of effectively dealing with the conflicts which are part of everyday school life.

The teachers spoke very positively about peacemaking circles in their classrooms. Nine of the twelve indicated that they intended to make circles an ongoing part of their teaching. They appreciated how circles brought learners together and recognized how different the process was to the traditional teacher-dominated classroom; in particular, there was an opportunity for all voices to be heard. Using a talking stick and the encouragement for everyone to speak and listen respectfully to each other helped to some learners overcome a sense of isolation and generally encouraged the building of community.

The circles helped learners know each other better by hearing what was happening in each other's lives and encouraged mutual support. Most teachers mentioned the value of hearing information from learners during the circle process as a major benefit to them. This information helped them to prepare for the day ahead and to learn about issues which could be addressed later; these included reasons for non-punctuality, homework challenges and cleanliness. In brief, circles allowed teachers to become better acquainted with their learners. The circles made them aware of their learners' home situations, some of which were outside their job description or their competence to handle.

The teachers noticed that the circles had a positive influence on behaviour. First, the circles created an 'early morning climate of peace' in the classroom which often seemed to continue through the day. Second, the circle process was used as a vehicle for improving behaviour by helping learners to realize the effects of their behaviour on others. Talking about rule infringements evoked discussion among learners on the importance of adhering to established classroom policies. Encouraged by teachers, learners began to express remorse, make apologies and practice more positive behaviours.

It is clear from these examples that there are indeed alternatives to corporal punishment in the home and school but these are not widely known. They are not difficult to learn and practice, and the opportunity is there for government and non-government agencies to promote them and provide training and encouragement in their use.

## 5. Where now for Seychelles?

Seychelles banned corporal punishment in schools in late 2017, although the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (2018) indicated that this was undermined by the continued right of teachers ‘to administer proper punishment’. While this article was in preparation, on May 15, 2020, the Seychelles National Assembly banned corporal punishment in homes (Seychelles News Agency, 2020).

Now the task will be to bring the law and social norms concerning discipline closer together. This will require sustained and carefully planned effort, and resistance to change may well be strong for reasons outlined in section 2. A related challenge is discussed in the 2019 *State of the World's Fathers* report (van der Gaag et al. 2019, pp. 53-63) which identified five ways in which the social norms concerning men’s contribution as caregivers in their families could change:

- ◆ Social gatekeepers such as religious, traditional, and political leaders can show the way.
- ◆ The health sector can nudge fathers to show up.
- ◆ Schools can promote boys’ caregiving and changes in norms.
- ◆ Public education and campaigns can model and promote men’s caregiving.
- ◆ Print, radio, tv, and online media can lend their voices, showing men doing the hands-on care work.

For Seychelles, the first step will be to establish an infrastructure with the responsibility of monitoring compliance, bringing state and non-government players together and organizing the education and training which are essential in changing social norms. In terms of education, the research reported in this article shows that corporal punishment has significant negative consequences during childhood and during adulthood for the majority of people; that there are alternative nonviolent methods of discipline; and that there is no evidence that banning corporal punishment is likely to result in widespread antisocial behaviour and social mayhem. This evidence needs to be widely disseminated in Seychelles. Sweden’s experience, among others, is relevant here. Durrant (2003) documents the efforts made to educate the population concerning corporal punishment and thereby gradually shift attitudes so that corporal punishment would come to be viewed as poor parenting practice.

Then there is training in practicing the alternative forms of discipline so that parents and teachers become confident in their use, and they become the new norm. There are many conflict resolution programmes which could support this training (one is the Alternatives to Violence Project) which would, incidentally, have much wider positive effects by enhancing the quality of other interactions.

To conclude on a positive note, research on the diffusion of a wide range of innovations has shown that once twenty per cent of a community adopts an innovation or practices some behaviour, the rest of the community will inevitably follow (Rogers, 2003). There is no reason why Seychelles cannot have totally different discipline procedures within a generation. The immediate beneficiaries will be the children but the benefits will extend throughout the entire population.

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