

# Hitting children is wrong

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## INTRODUCTION

The news<sup>1</sup> that in April 2020 Japan has become the 59th country to ban corporal punishment in the home highlights the significant progress that is being made to ensure that children receive the same protection as adults against violence. Sweden was the first country to introduce a ban in 1979 followed mainly by countries in northern Europe. At the shift of the millennium, still only 11 countries had introduced a ban, but since then there has been a steady increase, now with bans in all continents.

To many, it seems that the time cannot come quickly enough when we shall look back on smacking children as a remnant of a bygone age as we do on capital punishment. But to some (including many in the UK, and perhaps a majority in African countries, and some parts of the USA), the very thought of a ban is anathema, conjuring up the prospects of the state in the form of police and social workers interfering with the wish of parents to bring up their children in the way that they think is right.

In this article, we review the rationale for the ban and progress with the ban globally, examine the case being made in countries which oppose a ban, assess the evidence from Sweden over its effectiveness and call for renewed action to end the corporal punishment of children.

Most people understand that severe maltreatment is detrimental to children's health and development. Many adults (and even child professionals), on the other hand, still look on corporal punishment as a reasonable chastisement without any negative side effects. From a research point of view, there have been many difficulties in attempts to isolate corporal punishment from more severe forms of maltreatment and a number of other confounding factors. Research during the last 20 years has however shown that corporal punishment itself is associated with an increased probability of adverse physical, mental and behavioural outcomes. Moreover, there are no studies indicating that hitting a child, as a means of discipline, is beneficial

for the child.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup> article 19 states that it is the right of the child to grow up in an environment free from any form of maltreatment and be looked on as active citizens who can make decisions about their best interest. Children's participation in the field of maltreatment is recently well discussed by Kosher and Ben-Arieh.<sup>4</sup>

## GLOBAL PICTURE

According to the Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children,<sup>5</sup> there are now 59 countries which have full prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings. Japan (as mentioned above) became the 59th such country in March 2020. Twenty-seven EU countries have instituted a ban which represents a large majority of the region. Twenty-nine more countries have signified their intention to reform their laws in the same direction. Most of Europe and South and Central America have instituted a ban but there are significant gaps around the world, notably in Africa, Asia, Australia, the USA and Russia. The picture in the UK is interesting in that two of the devolved governments—Scotland and Wales—have legalised a ban but England and Northern Ireland have not, despite a number of attempts to pass the necessary legislation. Five countries in Africa together with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Malaysia do not yet have full prohibition in any setting. However, there are now seven African countries that have instituted legal prohibition. [Table 1](#) shows a timeline of the countries which have instituted a ban on corporal punishment in the home.

## WHY SOME COUNTRIES OPPOSE A BAN

It is important to recognise that there are still very strongly held views supporting corporal punishment in the home and opposing a state ban, particularly among some religions and cultural groups. This is still the case in England where the tabloid press tends to defend parents for using physical methods



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**Table 1** States prohibiting all corporal punishment of children, including in the home

2020	Japan
2019	Georgia, South Africa, France, Republic of Kosovo
2018	Nepal
2017	Lithuania
2016	Mongolia, Montenegro, Paraguay, Slovenia
2015	Benin, Ireland, Peru
2014	Andorra, Estonia, Nicaragua, San Marino, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Malta
2013	Cabo Verde, Honduras, North Macedonia
2011	South Sudan
2010	Albania, Congo (Republic of), Kenya, Tunisia, Poland
2008	Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Republic of Moldova, Costa Rica
2007	Togo, Spain, Venezuela, Uruguay, Portugal, New Zealand, The Netherlands
2006	Greece
2005	Hungary
2004	Romania, Ukraine
2003	Iceland
2002	Turkmenistan
2000	Germany, Israel, Bulgaria
1999	Croatia
1998	Latvia
1997	Denmark
1994	Cyprus
1989	Austria
1987	Norway
1983	Finland
1979	Sweden

From The Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children.<sup>5</sup>

and attacks the ‘nanny state’ which seeks to interfere with long hallowed methods of discipline. Opposition to legislation is particularly strong in African countries.

### HAS THE BAN WORKED?

Sweden is the only country that has been able to follow the effect of the ban with repeated studies using the same methodology over a 40-year period. Nationally representative samples of parents have been asked about knowledge, attitudes to spanking and behaviour according to Conflict Tactic Scale, an internationally well renowned methodology developed by Murray Straus<sup>6</sup> in 1971. Two years after the ban, >90% of Swedish adults were aware of the law. While 90% of parents in Sweden spanked their children in the 1970s, <10% did so in 2000, and even less in the last survey in 2016. For the majority of young Swedish parents, spanking is not an option and is looked on as adverse behaviour.<sup>7</sup> There are probably



**Figure 1** Publicity leaflet Swedish: Can you bring up children successfully without smacking or spanking?

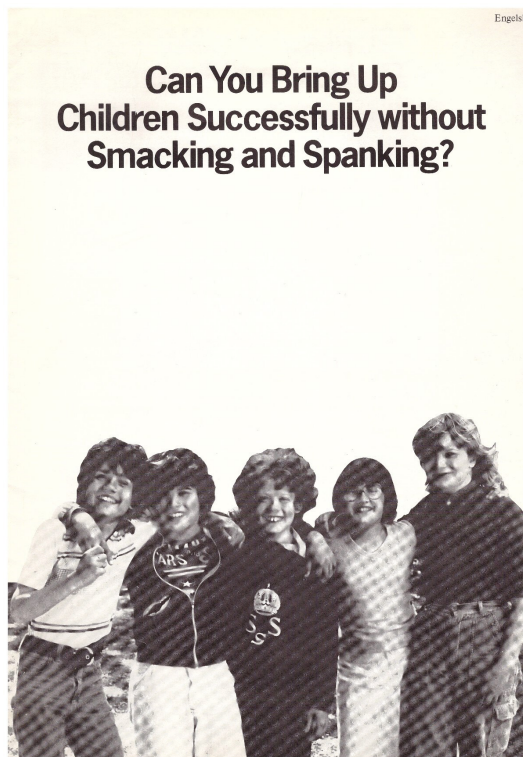
many reasons behind this positive outcome including early political consensus, a welfare state and a comparatively well-educated population.

### CHANGING PARENTAL VIEWPOINTS

Sweden also launched an unprecedented publicity campaign at the time of the introduction of the law (see figures 1 and 2 illustrating the publicity used at the time). Recent research indicates that such campaigns and follow-ups of the law are important as people in many countries continue to believe in the necessity of corporal punishment despite legal bans.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, there is a need of follow-up of the effect of the laws in different countries, taken into consideration social inequalities in family attitudes; there is also a need for continuing campaigns and education about the adverse effects of corporal punishment.

### A CALL FOR RENEWED ADVOCACY

It is clear that a considerable amount of education is needed in certain countries to inform the population of the following: that hitting children may stop the behaviour in the short term but in the long term has serious consequences; that if hitting children lightly does not work, parents go on to hit harder and most importantly, that children model their parents’ behaviour and if physical violence is the norm to induce prosocial behaviour, then they will learn to use violence themselves as older children and adults. However, it is also critical for



**Figure 2** Publicity leaflet English.

the state and local community groups to provide full support and education for parents in tackling difficult child behaviour, which is perhaps worsened by lifestyle (notably family breakup, drug abuse and the excessive use of social media).

In many countries that have instituted a ban, this has come about from consistent and persistent advocacy by professional organisations including paediatricians and children's sector groups working together in a coalition. In Scotland, a group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) published a report<sup>9</sup> in 2015 and the Scottish Green Party took the Bill through the Scottish Parliament; there was strong and consistent support from paediatricians in Scotland and from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.<sup>10</sup>

In countries yet to institute a ban, civil society is also working together and this collaboration gives hope for future reform. For example, in Uganda—a country where there is quite strong support for smacking in the home, the Uganda Child Rights NGO Network<sup>11</sup> is a coalition of 150 child-focused organisations including community-based, national and international NGOs working for the welfare and rights of children in Uganda which has called for the end to violence against children in the home.

We call on paediatricians and child health professionals around the world to join with others in the children's sector to press their government to take the necessary steps to protect children from all forms of violence. This will require an extensive education campaign both on the high risks of hitting children and

on the substantial benefits of non-violent parenting. Practical steps which can be taken by paediatricians are:

- ▶ Talk to parents about parenting without violence, its benefits and techniques.
- ▶ Make contact with local and global advocacy organisations such as International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, Save the Children, End Corporal Punishment of Children
- ▶ Find out your national paediatric association stance on corporal punishment and work with others to influence this
- ▶ Write to your MP or other government representative to ask for national legislation against corporal punishment, possibly with anonymised examples from your practice.

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