



# Fact Sheet Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
September 2024



## Smack (verb)

to strike smartly, especially with the open hand or anything flat. [Macquarie Dictionary Online \(2017\)](#)

**People often have strong opinions about whether smacking is right or wrong, helpful or harmful, or whether parents should even have the right to smack their children.**

It can be overwhelming for parents when outsiders – including other parents, onlookers, politicians or various experts – weigh into the debate about how they should raise their children.

But it can be equally difficult and confusing for the children and young people at the centre of the debate.

Why does this matter?

## A balancing act

Article 19 of the UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) says the government must protect children from violence by anyone who looks after them.

In terms of the smacking debate, this seems only fair; after all, it is children and young people who may be smacked or physically punished by their parents.

While parents have a [legal responsibility](#) to care for and protect their children, they are generally free to raise their children according to their own [values and beliefs](#), unless by doing so, the safety or wellbeing of their children is being put at [risk](#).



# Fact Sheet Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
September 2024

## What is physical punishment?

Physical (aka corporal) punishment is the disciplining of a child or young person to try and change or control a child's or young person's behaviour.

This might involve:

- smacking, slapping
- hitting/spanking with objects like spoons or belts
- pushing, pinching, shaking or dragging children, and/or
- pulling children's hair.

The percentage of parents/guardians who self report smacking ranges from 28% in one study, to 72% in another. Another online [poll](#) found that 17% of parents said they had used physical punishment at least some time in the past month.

## Why is physical punishment harmful for children?

There is now overwhelming evidence that physical punishment does more harm than good. A review of 75 studies across 13 countries reported all but one study found spanking to be associated with negative child outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

### Adverse effects of physical punishment:<sup>2</sup>

- Mental health issues, low moral internalisation and low self-esteem. The Australian Maltreatment Study, for example, found that the experience of being physically disciplined more than four times in childhood increases the rate of depression in 16–24 year olds.
- Poor parent-child relationships and a weakening in trust and bonds, negatively effecting interpersonal relationships when children become adults.
- Increased aggression and antisocial behaviours, including increased probability of suicide attempts, drug and alcohol misuse and addictions.
- Impaired cognitive ability, including evidence of a change in the growth of the brain that leads to a smaller frontal cortex with which to control motor tasks, apply judgement, use abstract thinking and creativity, and maintain social appropriateness.

## What do children and young people say about physical punishment?

Giving kids  
smacks was illegal

9 year old boy

that my parents ~~think~~  
think that I am lying  
but i am not.  
And they hit me.

8 year old girl

that if we behave badly we  
should get a scolding but  
not phisically hurt us

9 year old girl

im not a punch in bag.  
And + nat I dont enjoy  
being yelled at every day

12 year old boy

it really  
hurts ~~when~~ when  
you slap us

10 year old boy

that just because we are  
young does not give them a  
right to hurt us and to let  
them know we have voices too.

9 year old girl



# Fact Sheet

# Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
September 2024

## Why doesn't physical punishment work?

Although physical punishment can increase a child's compliance and behaviour in the short term, research shows that it will not be effective over the long term. In fact, using corporal punishment models the use of violent physical behaviour between or against adults and over time this can actually increase a child's non-compliance and aggression<sup>3</sup>.

Use of physical punishment:

- Does not teach children how to manage their emotions effectively in safe ways. Neither does it allow them to develop the ability to recognise what the strong emotions that they are feeling are, or give them capacity to respond to them well.
- Does not teach children how to behave appropriately. Instead it reinforces the use of inappropriate behaviour modelled by their parents/carers that includes yelling, hitting and other forms of aggression.
- Does not teach children how to react positively, appropriately or proportionately when negative experiences occur and strong feelings and emotions inevitably arise.

## Legal status in South Australia

In South Australia, it is unlawful for children and young people to be smacked in alternative care settings, day care facilities, schools and youth training centres. Striking another person can amount to assault, and can result in criminal charges.

Parents can still legally 'smack' or physically discipline their children if their actions are 'reasonable' and done for genuine disciplinary purposes.

But what is 'reasonable'? It is likely to mean different things to different people. Such ambiguity risks causing confusion and greater uncertainty, both for parents and for children and young people, as well as for police.

Definitions aside, there is also a risk that the continued acceptance of smacking and the use of other forms of physical punishment in Australian culture may amount to a serious violation of international human rights agreements, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## What are some alternatives to use of physical punishment?

According to the Raising Children Network, discipline is about helping children learn how to behave appropriately. Striving to achieve balance and consistency, as well as considering the rights of children and young people may also help when deciding on an appropriate course of discipline.

There are many ways to guide children and young people towards appropriate behaviour and help them to learn and develop well, thereby building better relationships with their parents and carers.

Positive parenting approaches include the following:

- Help your child learn to cooperate with others and follow instructions.
- Help your child learn to understand their emotions.
- Make it easy for your child to change from one activity to another.
- Help your child develop independence and learn skills to do the things they need or want to do.
- Use family rules and discussions to help your child/children understand what behaviour is acceptable in your family.
- Be a role model. Children do as you do.
- Prepare for difficult situations like shopping trips, having visitors, or crossing busy roads.
- Understand that children might not behave well if they're hungry, tired or unwell.



# Fact Sheet Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
September 2024

## Physical punishment and the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child

# 1990

Australia ratified the convention, agreeing to prevent children from being hurt or mistreated.

# 196

parties have signed the convention, with the USA & Somalia not yet signatories.

# 66

countries have made it illegal for parents to smack their children. Australia, the USA & the UK are noticeably absent from this list, despite significant criticism.

# 2019

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended again that Australia completely ban the use of smacking and physical punishment.

## How does Australia compare to the rest of the world?

Australia ratified the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990. In doing so, the government agreed to prevent children from being hurt or mistreated.

As the most widely ratified human rights instrument in the world, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* has been signed by 196 parties. Only two countries – the United States of America and Somalia – are not yet signatories.

There are now 66 countries around the world that have taken their commitment a step further and made it illegal for parents to smack their children.

In Italy corporal punishment has been made unlawful through a Supreme Court Decision, but this has not yet been enacted into law. Another 13 countries have committed to ending corporal punishment in all settings. Australia is not one of these countries.

The United States of America and the United Kingdom are also noticeably absent from the list. Wales, however, has recently outlawed all forms of physical punishment, and there is now a strong campaign for this to occur throughout the UK.

This lack of action has led to criticism from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which recommended again in 2019 that Australia completely ban the use of smacking and physical punishment.

## Case Study: 'Courageous' New Zealand

New Zealand completely banned smacking and other forms of physical punishment in 2007, becoming the first English speaking country to do so.

Despite some concerns about how the law would affect parents and their ability to discipline their children, researchers found that there was no significant increase in the number of complaints being made about minor acts of discipline, nor was anyone prosecuted for a minor act of discipline.

## Case Study: 'Progressive' Sweden

Sweden abolished all forms of physical punishment against children in 1979.

Rather than taking a punitive approach, the government initiated a widespread educational campaign aimed at encouraging parents to seek help with child management difficulties and to learn about different ways of disciplining their children.

Over a generation later, there are claims that attitudes towards violence and physical punishment have changed for the better in Sweden.



# Fact Sheet Smacking and Physical Punishment

Commissioner for  
Children & Young People  
September 2024

## Key Facts

- South Australian parents are generally free to make their own decisions about how to raise their children.
- Individual values, beliefs and parenting styles; along with the age, temperament and developmental stage of the child or young person, are all important factors for parents to consider when deciding how to discipline their children.
- Research shows that the use of physical punishment does more harm than good, affecting a child's development, health and wellbeing with positive parenting strategies proven to be much better for a child's long term health and wellbeing.



## Endnotes

- 1 Gershoff ET, Grogan-Kaylor A. Spanking and child outcomes: old controversies and new meta-analyses. *J Fam Psych* 2016;30:453–69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>.
- 2 Sophie S. Havighurst, Ben Mathews, Frances L. Doyle, Divna M. Haslam, Karl Andriessen, Carmen Cubillo, Sharon Dawe, David J. Hawes, Cynthia Leung, Trevor G. Mazzucchelli, Alina Morawska, Sarah Whittle, Carys Chainey, Daryl J. Higgins. Corporal punishment of children in Australia: The evidence-based case for legislative reform. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Volume 47, Issue 3, 2023, 100044. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100044>.
- 3 Gershoff ET, Grogan-Kaylor A. Spanking and child outcomes: old controversies and new meta-analyses. *J Fam Psych* 2016;30:453–69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>. Hellmann A, Mehay A, Watt RG, Kelly Y, Durrant JE, van Turnhour J, et al. Physical punishment and child outcomes: a narrative review of prospective studies. *Lancet* 2021;398:355–64. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)0058-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)0058-1).