



A NEW INITIATIVE FOR PEACE IN NEW ZEALAND

Psycho-historians and social scientists have long argued that the most certain way to ensure peaceful, just and sustainable societies is to renounce violence and authoritarianism in the raising of our children. Well, the New Zealanders are taking an interesting step in this direction. Our friends across the Tasman have put a bill before parliament to stop parents smacking their kids. What has led the Kiwis to take this extraordinary step, and would this measure eventually produce the gains social harmony, justice and peace that psycho-historians and psychologists have predicted?

In a new trend quickly spreading around the globe, smacking seems to be losing its aura of acceptability. Many people are aware that the Swedes abolished corporal punishment in their homes in 1979. What few realise is how many countries have followed the Swedish example. The same ban has now been adopted by 14 other European nations, and commitments to proceed with full prohibition are current in the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Greece. Still more nations have acted to introduce better child protection without amending their Constitutions. The highest courts of Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Portugal have ruled that any kind of corporal punishment against children, whether at school or in the home, is unacceptable. We can soon expect these court rulings to be enshrined in legislation in these countries.

The UK government has fallen foul of the Council of Europe for being one of the few recalcitrants still eschewing reform. The European Court of Human Rights has found unanimously that UK law – the “reasonable chastisement” defense – failed to give children adequate protection. Among the British people however, the call for abolition is gathering momentum. This movement is spearheaded by umbrella organizations such as: ‘Children are unbeatable!’ - an alliance of more than 300 groups including the NSPCC, Save the Children, Barnardo's and the National Children 's Bureau.

But this is more than a chic European phenomenon. All countries – including Australia - that have signed the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child are, under Article 19, obliged to protect children from all forms of physical and psychological violence. A global initiative to end all corporal punishment of children was launched at the UN in April 2001, citing research that shows smacking has no positive effects, and generally that corporal punishment – even when it is thought by parents to be ‘light’ – can be psychologically damaging to children. Outside Europe, Israel and Iceland have comprehensively outlawed the smack, and the Taiwanese president is urging his country to do the same. New Zealand is poised to be the first southern hemisphere nation to give its children the same protection enjoyed by adults.

The Canadian Department of Health mounted an educational campaign to teach parents non-violent alternatives to ‘discipline’. In January 2004, the Supreme Court of Canada re-evaluated the constitutionality of section 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada, which justifies physical punishment of children in the name of correction. While stopping short



of a full repeal, they voted to limit the scope of this defense by restricting hitting to certain ages, with limited force, to certain parts of the body. The movement for a full repeal of section 43 remains vigorous however.

The USA is arguably the most child-spanking nation among modern democracies. A nylon rod and a polyurethane ‘chastisement tool’ for parents are openly for sale there. In 22 of 50 states, schoolteachers use a wooden paddle to redden student’s bottoms. It seems to confirm the predictions of social scientists, that the states allowing corporal punishment in schools tend to have the highest crime rates, and that the USA has the highest homicide rate in the developed world, and the highest incarceration rate in the world. USA is not a homogenous culture, however. In Massachusetts, where corporal punishment has long been abolished in schools, the town of Brookline has just become the first smacking-free town, signalling public non-acceptance of this parental practice.

The pressure for change continues to mount around the world as many more nations - including Ireland, Spain, South Korea, Fiji, Haiti and South Africa - and now New Zealand - are pursuing prohibitions through their parliaments. A majority of New Zealand MPs are in favour of this child-protective law reform, and over fifty government and non-government organizations – including the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, the Public Health Association of New Zealand and UNICEF New Zealand - have declared their support. In the meantime, the North Island town of Ngongotaha has pre-emptively declared itself a ‘no smacking community’.

The most ardent detractors in New Zealand have been religious schools and institutions such as the Maxim Institute, a right-wing fundamentalist think-tank. One Christian school protested by sending all the parents a brochure instructing them on how to hit their children with implements. The school principal stated: “We are helping parents raise children in a biblical way”, and that smacking or spanking a child is: “balanced, it’s nurturing, it’s safe”. Sue Bradford, the Greens MP who is sponsoring the child protection bill, is concerned at the brochure’s suggestion to use a “stiff flexible rod”, and at the statement: “the key to spanking is LOVE”. The same trend has been seen in most countries seeking to spare the rod. Christian schools have fought hard for caning rights in the UK, South Africa, NSW (where the cane was banned in schools in 1997), and in Victoria, which is set to become the next state to ban the strap in all schools.

As a smacking-friendly culture, Australia is one of the remaining enclaves among developed nations. But judging by world trends and developments in our neighbourhood, our turn may soon come for a total ban. As a signatory to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Australia is expected to fall into line – and in fact, Tassie could be the first state to comply. The Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and the Tasmanian Law Reform Institute have already called for a repeal of the defence of ‘reasonable correction’.

So, where are these changes likely to lead us? Will our children be cast adrift into anarchy? So far, Sweden is the only country in which an entire generation of children has



grown up free of corporal punishment. Since 1979, there has been a marked reduction in assaults on children, and the child homicide rate has been virtually eliminated: it was zero for fifteen years running. Sweden has enjoyed a steady decline in youth crime, substance abuse, rape and suicide. It would seem that giving children the same protection as adults has been remarkably successful for Swedish children, and for Swedish society as a whole. If the Swedish example is anything to go by, some heartening social changes could be anticipated in New Zealand and in other abolitionist nations. Could some of these social improvements materialize for Australia if we followed suit? Social scientists have found that individuals who have been raised by authoritarian style parents tend to be more conservative in their political leanings, and they even tend to oppose the environmental movement. One wonders what a ban on corporal punishment would do to our political demographics in the years to follow. In any case, it looks increasingly likely that most readers who are parents will soon need to say goodbye to the smack, and the 'rods of correction' will need to be archived.

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