

This is a text version of a podcast from PedsCases.com on “**Physical Punishment of Children in Canada.**” These podcasts are designed to give medical students an overview of key topics in pediatrics. The audio versions are accessible on iTunes or at www.pedcases.com/podcasts.

Physical Punishment of Children in Canada

Developed by Michael Schlegelmilch and the Child and Youth Protection Team at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario for PedsCases.com
Nov 17, 2017

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Michael Schlegelmilch and I am a medical student at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. This podcast was developed in collaboration with the Child and Youth Protection (CYP) team at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) in Ottawa, Canada including Drs. Torrey Parker, Louise Murray, Alissa Dupuis and Michelle Ward, staff pediatricians in addition to Abby Browne, registered nurse.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this podcast, the learner will be able to:

1. Understand what physical punishment is and what it is not.
2. Contrast the difference between physical abuse and physical punishment.
3. Discuss the evidence around the effectiveness and harms of physical punishment.
4. Review the current laws in Canada pertaining to physical punishment
5. Examine how other countries approach physical punishment and what the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child state with respect to physical punishment.
6. Develop recommendations for parents on discipline and understand collaborative problem solving with children.

This podcast will not discuss the how to investigate, diagnose, or report physical abuse. Please check out a related podcast by Dr. Melanie Lewis, entitled “Physical Abuse of Children” if this is your interest.

Scenario

Let’s suppose that rather than in the clinic, you’re on a lovely weekend cottage getaway with a friend. You and your friend are sitting on the edge of the dock when your friend, who has a 2-year-old son named Taz, asks you for advice on discipline. She tells you that she’s

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now a firm believer in the ‘terrible twos’ and says the only way to get Taz to listen is by spanking him. She wonders if this is a good idea, and asks, ‘are people still doing this?’.

Because you are so conscientious of your CanMEDs roles, even while on vacation, you identify this as a good opportunity to be a medical expert, advocate and communicator.

Prevalence and Definitions

The prevalence of physical punishment is difficult to establish because the definition of physical punishment is vague and there is also a tendency of caregivers to be subject to recall bias or to under report. However, a national Canadian survey in 2002 estimated that 50% of families used ‘light’ physical punishment and 6% used painful physical punishment. A survey in the same year of 436 university-aged students in two Canadian provinces reported that 75% of respondents were physically punished as a child and 40% of them felt it was warranted.

The definition of physical punishment can be varied, and may include: spanking, washing a child’s mouth with soap, forcing them to maintain a uncomfortable physical position, forced physical labour or denying food, water or sleep. There are also two distinct uses of physical force with children that are not punitive. One is called physical restraint, where a child needs to be forcibly handled to protect him or herself, such as grabbing a child’s arm to prevent him or her from running into traffic. The other is physical force for self-defense.

Most importantly, the difference between physical punishment and physical abuse is difficult to establish. Even if you are considering degrees of force, parental intent or severity of a child’s injury, the line between abuse and punishment is blurry.

“Ok,” your friend says, “but it seems to work, and I was spanked as a kid and turned out fine.”

You feel as though this is a nice segway into a discussion on the evidence of effectiveness of physical punishment, and so you seize the moment. You also feel that you’re friend is losing interest in what you have to say, so you decide to re-invigorate her with a stirring declaration.

Evidence of Effectiveness

“There is no evidence to support the use of physical punishment in raising a child and it can only pose risk of harms to development!”, you decry off the edge of the dock. Some ducks quack and fly off.

Now that your friend is suitably stimulated, you carry on and explain why you can be so confident –which is very much out of keeping with your typically anxious med student persona. You decide to reference a meta analysis. Your friend will understand, she’s so meta.

A 2002 meta-analysis investigated 88 studies to examine the relationship between physical punishment and desirable outcomes (such as immediate behavioural compliance) and undesirable outcomes (aggressive behaviour in the child, anti-social behaviours, spousal abuse later in life and physical abuse). The two outcomes with the largest effect sizes were immediate compliance - a positive, and physical abuse - a negative. This is in keeping with other evidence that suggests the risk of escalation of physical punishment to physical abuse is common. A separate Canadian study found that 75% of physical abuse (defined as significant harm to the child) happened during physical punishment.

Furthermore, children who were physically punished were more likely to be violent towards their family, have poorer mental health, exhibit anti-social behavioural or delinquency and be violent to their spouse or own children later in life.

“Whoa.” Your friend says. “I was going to fake text to wrap this up, but I didn’t realize spanking had such long term consequences, but it makes sense. I feel like more parents should know this. It’s not illegal though right?” she asks.

What the law says

No, it’s not illegal. Though the Criminal Code of Canada protects Canadians from physical assault there is one exception: persons in authority such as, parents, teachers and those acting in the role of parents who use physical force reasonably and with corrective intent. The law does prohibit any use of physical force on children under 2 and in teenagers. It also prohibits the use of objects, like a belt, or spoon, and any use of force to the head. I don't think parents realize that slapping their teen's face is actually against the law.

Indeed, there is lots of ambiguity built into this statement and it has lead to a lot of confusion at multiple levels of government.

This ‘protection of persons in authority’ has been challenged multiple times at provincial and federal courts in Canada, and each time it has been upheld as constitutional. The UN Committee on the right of the Child states that in all areas pertaining to children, the best interest of the child shall be primary and that physical punishment is incompatible with the convention.

Elsewhere, Austria repealed its ‘protection of persons in authority’ 40 years ago. Sweden was 20 years before them. These changes gave children the same legal protection from assault as adults.

You’re friend says nothing, because she, well, she is stunned. You offer to answer her original question about how to best discipline her 2 year old son, Taz. She nods in acceptance.

Normal developmental exploration is often misinterpreted by caregivers as defiance, which then often leads to punishment. There are many different parental strategies that may be

effective. For instance, a recommended alternative is to restructure the child's environment to allow for safe exploration or de-escalation if the child is having a tantrum, such as a time out. Additionally, distraction from dangerous objects, modeling good behaviour, explaining and teaching risks and consequences and planning for challenging situations can all help prevent the need for discipline.

Research has shown that 'collaborative problem solving' may be a superior approach for positive effective discipline. Adults often have a "Plan A" in mind for their children, for example, "You need to do 30 minutes of homework." For some kids, this is fine, for others this may be beyond what they are capable of doing, for many reasons. For these kids, they may tell their caregiver in many ways that this is not possible by yelling, hitting, crying, running, breaking things, withdrawing. They often propose a "Plan C" – no homework.

Collaborative problem solving aims to establish a Plan B, which simply is a compromise. Coming up with an appropriate Plan B requires a discussion of both the child's and parent's interests, and not just their positions. For example a child may take the position at the doctor's office, that they don't want a physical exam (Plan C). Rather than forcing a physical exam (Plan A), you can learn what the child's interests are, and you may be able to propose a different position (Plan B) that still satisfies their interests. In this example, let's say that the child worries about missing chocolate milk day at school if the physical exam takes too long. So, perhaps a focused physical exam can be done so they can still get back to school for chocolate milk day. In this way everyone's interests are satisfied with a position that wasn't initially proposed.

"Pft. Easier said than done.", your friend rightly quips. "You don't have kids."
"You're 100% correct."

Plan B is never a quick fix, but it helps formulate solutions to problematic situations that often trigger difficult behaviours, like going to the doctor. Compared to physical punishment, the solutions are more lasting, less harmful and build a more positive and trusting relationship between the child and the caregiver.

In summary:

1. Physical punishment in Canada is difficult to measure, and the line where punishment becomes abuse is not clearly defined.
2. There is no evidence that physical punishment has any place in raising children. The long-term negative effects are well known and include poorer mental health, more aggressive behaviour, and a greater risk of spousal and child abuse later in life. It also stresses and can weaken the caregiver-child relationship, garnering fear and avoidance.
3. Canadian law protects parents from criminal charges if their use of force against a child is reasonable and corrective. This has been reversed in several countries worldwide. Canada has upheld this law more than once in the past 20 years.

4. Alternative disciplinary practices should be *strongly* encouraged to caregivers. Specifically, the Collaborative Problem Solving approach builds a stronger relationship between child and caregiver and encourages more confident problem solving and self-motivation in children.

Thank You:

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