

Never Violence – Thirty Years on from Sweden’s Abolition of Corporal Punishment



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Nothing affects me more deeply than violence against children. Fortunately I am not alone in this: many of us feel revulsion and rage when we read or hear about child abuse. Hitting a child is a betrayal. It is also a misuse of adult responsibility and physical advantage – the physical advantage that is there to protect our children but instead is used to hurt them.

When a child is beaten the blows are etched on the skin and in the soul. Most children recover quickly from their injuries, but in some cases the wounds never heal. And the scars last forever.

In the past there was nothing unusual about parents using corporal punishment to discipline their children. Many of us have seen the scene in the Ingmar Bergman film *Fanny and Alexander* where Alexander is punished by his stepfather – a disturbing and brutal scene from which it is hard not to look away. It portrays a reality that many children experienced in the past.

Violence meted out to children by adults remains a problem, but nowadays far fewer children are subjected to the kind of treatment portrayed in the film. Support for corporal punishment among parents has dropped from just above 50 percent to barely 10 percent since 1960. The number of preschool children who are smacked has fallen from slightly more than 90 percent to about 10 percent in the same time frame. But no single child should have to suffer violence or humiliating and degrading treatment by adults!

We have come as far as we have thanks to legislation, publicity and awareness campaigns. As of 1 July 2009, Sweden will have had a ban on corporal punishment for 30 years. Sweden was first in the world to introduce legislation of this kind. Three decades on, it is time to review its impact and explain the results.

It was not hard to say yes when Save the Children Sweden asked the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs if we would like to get involved in producing this booklet. I hope it paints a picture of the Swedish legislation, the efforts made to achieve it and the impact it has had. Last but not least, I hope it inspires similar efforts in other countries at the same time as we remind ourselves of the fundamental child rights that underpin the legislation, and remember that success is not guaranteed forever.



Göran Hägglund

Minister of Health and Social Affairs

Endorsement

This booklet was written by Save the Children Sweden in cooperation with the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. It includes input from the many people who work hard to combat all forms of violence and emotionally abusive treatment levelled at children in Sweden and abroad. Attaining concrete results requires efforts on many fronts. Research and analysis are important for monitoring developments and knowing what actions are necessary. We must listen to the children themselves, speak out on their behalf and defend their right to grow up without violence. The 30th anniversary of the ban on all forms of violence and demeaning treatment of children in Sweden reminds us what legislation and awareness campaigns can achieve – and how vital it is to keep working together to redouble our efforts to protect the right of children to freedom from violence and emotional abuse.

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Europe is moving towards a total ban of corporal punishment against children

A majority of the Council of Europe member states have now committed themselves to put an end to all corporal punishment of children.

The example set by some countries, including Sweden, demonstrated that prohibition of child abuse also within families indeed was meaningful. Important was that their position was confirmed by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. This treaty stipulated that governments should take legislative and other steps to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence while in the care of parent(s), legal guardians or any other person who has the care of the child.

It has to be underlined over and over again that this is not a zero-sum-game between children and parents. The UN Convention is very family-friendly, it stresses the absolute importance of a good family environment and the need, in some cases, for community support to parents in crisis. Violence against children is a reflection of family breakdown and calls for the protection of the life, well-being and dignity of the child. This is a major reason why the prevention of domestic violence against children is nowadays recognised as a human rights concern.

The purpose of prohibiting corporal punishment of children is precisely prevention. The idea is to encourage a change of attitudes and practice and to promote non-violent methods of child-rearing. An unambiguous message of what is unacceptable is very important. Adults responsible for children are sometimes confused about how to handle difficult situations. The line should simply be drawn between physical or psychological violence on the one hand and non-violence on the other.

The problem is deep and serious. As part of their daily lives, children across Europe and the world continue to be spanked, slapped, hit, smacked, shaken, kicked, pinched, punched, caned, flogged, belted, beaten and battered in the name of “discipline”, mainly by adults whom they depend upon. As the Polish doctor, writer and educationalist Janusz Korczak once said: “There are many terrible things in the world, but the worst is when a child is afraid of his father, mother or teacher”.

This violence may be a deliberate act of punishment or just the impulsive reaction of an irritated parent or teacher. Both cases constitute a breach of human rights. Respect for human dignity and the right to physical integrity are universal principles. But despite this, social and legal acceptance of adults hitting children and inflicting other humiliating treatment on them persists.

The invention of concepts such as “reasonable punishment” and “lawful correction” arises from the perception of children as the property of their parents. Such “rights” are based on the power of the stronger over the weaker and are upheld by means of violence and humiliation.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called in 2004 for a Europe-wide ban of corporal punishment. It stated that “any corporal punishment of children is in breach of their fundamental right to human dignity and physical integrity. The fact that such corporal punishment is still lawful in certain member states violates their equally fundamental right to the same legal protection as adults. Striking a human being is prohibited in European society and children are human beings. The social and legal acceptance of corporal punishment of children must be ended.”

Of course, eliminating corporal punishment requires more than legal reform. Sustained public education and awareness-raising of the law and of children’s right to protection is required, together with promotion of positive, non-violent relationships with children. The Council of Europe programme “Building a Europe for and with children” is promoting the abolition of corporal punishment through law reform, the promotion of positive parenting and awareness raising efforts likely to change public attitudes and behaviours.

Children have had to wait the longest to be given equal legal protection from deliberate assaults – a protection the rest of us take for granted. It is extraordinary that children, whose developmental state and small size is acknowledged to make them particularly vulnerable to physical and psychological harm, have been singled out for less protection from assaults on their fragile bodies, minds and dignity.

Challenging legal and social acceptance of violence has been a fundamental part of women’s struggle for equal status. The same applies to children:

there could not be a more symbolic reflection of children's persisting low status as property than adults' assumption of their "right" and even "duty", to hit children.

Thomas Hammarberg
Commissioner for Human Rights
Council of Europe

“With respect for their person and individuality”¹

In 2009 it is 30 years since Sweden introduced a ban on all forms of violent and emotionally abusive treatment of children. In so doing, Sweden became the first country in the world to prohibit violence as a means of child-rearing. Many countries have since followed our example, and as of March 2009 a total of 24 nations have legislation banning all corporal punishment in the home.

The abolition of corporal punishment, along with the debate that preceded it and the publicity campaigns that followed, has had a major impact on children’s lives. Like adults, children in Sweden have a legal right to integrity and protection from violence and other humiliating treatment. Ever since the legislation was introduced it has attracted international attention. The 30th anniversary is an opportune moment to look back at what the legislation has meant to Sweden and to the world.

Sweden’s road towards banning physical punishment

The view that parents are entitled and even duty-bound to physically punish their children has long historical roots in most countries and cultures. At the same time, throughout history a number of great thinkers have taken a stand against violence and emotionally abusive treatment directed at children. Mr. Janusz Korczak, a Polish-Jewish paediatrician, educationalist and children’s author, was one. In his book “The Child’s Right to Respect”, published in 1925, he wrote:

“In what extraordinary circumstances would one dare to push, hit or tug an adult? And yet it is considered so routine and harmless to give a child a tap or stinging smack or to grab it by the arm. The feeling of powerless-

¹ Children and Parents Code, chapter 1, section 6



ness creates respect for power. Not only adults but anyone who is older and stronger can cruelly demonstrate their displeasure, back up their words with force, demand obedience and abuse the child without being punished. We set an example that fosters contempt for the weak. This is bad parenting and sets a bad precedent."

Throughout history and in all countries there have always been ordinary parents who would never consider subjecting their children to physical force or other abuse. The children of these parents will in all likelihood never hit their children. One of the commonest reasons why parents hit their children is that they were brought up that way themselves. Breaking down engrained and inherited barriers demands persistence, information and persuasive arguments. Providing support to parents can help them to handle conflicts without resorting to force.

It took Sweden a long time to abolish physical punishment. The debate leading up to the ban reflected the Swedish and international discourse of the day, which was beginning to focus on the rights of children. The notion of children having individual rights was articulated in 1923 in a declaration on child rights by the International Save the Children Union. A year later the declaration was adopted by the League of Nations and came to be known as the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Highlighting children's conditions

New ideas about children and childhood began gaining ground in many countries in the 1930s, along with growing knowledge among paediatricians, child psychologists and educationalists about the negative impact on children of physical punishment and emotionally abusive treatment. In Sweden, a publicity campaign informed parents over the course of several decades. This initiative was mainly in the form of meetings at lectures and presentations by non-governmental organisations, educational associations and individuals which engaged parents and other carers around the country in discussions of how to raise children without violence. The physical punishment issue was also debated on the radio and in newspaper articles. The initiative raised awareness that children who have been frightened, threatened and smacked carry the damage inside them into adulthood, that violence breeds

violence, and that children must be treated with respect and understanding if they are to grow into responsible citizens.

In the 1930s a Swedish newspaper published a series of articles highlighting the plight of children taken into care due to “anti-social behaviour” or neglect and brought up by the state in institutions. The articles revealed cases of systematic physical punishment and serious maltreatment in the institutions over long periods of time. Ten years later, the regulations governing children’s reformatories were changed to include a ban on all forms of corporal punishment.

After World War II the debate intensified. At this time, the family was at the centre of political discourse and government reforms. The debate not only focused on violent and emotionally abusive treatment as a means of childrearing. Conditions for families and children and the government’s responsibility for child welfare also entered the political agenda, with proponents of reform suggesting that violence and abuse were rooted in ignorance and poverty. The reformists believed society was duty-bound to create reasonable living conditions for all children and to guarantee welfare for families. Child benefits, free school lunches, antenatal clinics, children’s clinics and school healthcare were introduced and parents were given information on many issues important to families from health, nutrition and parenting to interior design.

Physical punishment banned in schools

In the first half of the 20th century, schools used violence and the threat of violence on “educational” grounds to promote learning, maintain order and punish misdemeanours. In 1945 Parliament debated this issue as part of a motion proposing abolition of the Schools Code because “it represents a method of child-rearing widely scorned by genuine and professional educational and psychological knowledge”. The Member of Parliament who proposed the motion received support from many colleagues who were opposed to smacking in principle but even some of them did not believe it could be abolished entirely as a form of discipline. Many members voiced concern over how schools would maintain order if smacking was banned, noting that a majority of parents believed teachers should be entitled to smack pupils.

Not until 1958, after numerous reports and parliamentary debates, was a general ban on smacking in schools introduced.² The only other country to have introduced such a ban was Norway, in 1936.³ A new Swedish Schools Charter stipulated in § 54 that:

“The teacher should promote a cheerful atmosphere and enjoyment from work, strive to win pupils’ confidence, and respect pupils as independent people. He may not subject the pupil to physical punishment or humiliating treatment.”

While various aspects of schooling are a frequent topic of debate in Parliament, the media and the general public, no political party, teachers’ union or school authority would consider proposing the reintroduction of smacking in schools. It is widely recognized that physical punishment by teachers is both ineffective and a violation of pupils’ basic rights.

The ban on physical punishment in schools preceded the abolition of smacking by parents. The same pattern exists at the global level today. More than 40 per cent of children worldwide are protected from physical punishment in school, but only 2–3 per cent have legal protection from violence in the family.

1979 – ready for a decision

As awareness and understanding grew and views of childhood and parenting gradually changed, legislation also shifted. Some changes in family-related law had already occurred that reflected an increasing emphasis on the human right to protection from violence, even in relationships with inherent power differentials. For example, in the late 19th century, the right of a husband to beat his wife was abolished, and in the early 20th century an employer lost the right to beat his staff.

But still in 1920, a statute gave parents full rights to “chastise” their children. In 1949 a legal amendment changed this entitlement to use of suitable “means of upbringing” in an attempt to discourage the

² SOU 2001:72, 2001, Barnmisshandel – Att förebygga och åtgärda

³ Council of Europe, 2007, Eliminating corporal punishment
– A human rights imperative for Europe’s children





more heavy-handed forms of physical punishment. In 1966 all mention of parental rights to smack children was removed from the Children and Parents Code and a cross-reference was inserted to the Penal Code, which imposes penalties for assault against adults and children. Society at that time was not yet ready to accept explicit prohibition of smacking by parents, but the debate continued and in 1977 the government set up a parliamentary committee to examine the rights of the child. By this time, the public debate had shifted from the rights of the parent to the rights of the child.

Many prominent people became involved in this debate. One was Astrid Lindgren, Sweden's best-known children's author. In 1978, the year before Sweden passed anti-smacking legislation, she received the German Book Trade Peace Prize. Her acceptance speech was entitled "Never Violence" and included a story once told to her by an old woman. As a young mother, the woman had heard that smacking was a necessary part of a child's upbringing. One day her young son had done something she thought warranted punishment, so she told the boy to go into the woods to find a birch with which she could beat him.

"The boy was away for a long time and eventually returned in tears, saying:

– I couldn't find a birch but here's a stone you can throw at me.

The mother suddenly saw the situation through her son's eyes and began to cry too. The child must have thought:

– My mother wants to hurt me so she might as well use a stone.

She hugged him and the two cried together for a while. Then she placed the stone on a shelf in the kitchen, where it remained as a constant reminder of the lifelong pledge that she made at that very moment: never violence!"

Though the Children and Parents Code no longer mentioned any parental right to inflict physical punishment, many parents nevertheless believed that the law entitled them to hit their children. Therefore, the law needed clarification to ensure that children would be protected from violence. As 1979 had been designated the International Year of the Child by the United Nations – and was the year in which Poland proposed an international

charter on the rights of the child – the sensitivity of Members of Parliament to children’s well-being was heightened. By this time, public attitudes toward physical punishment were largely negative.

In March 1979, Parliament voted almost unanimously in favour of an amendment to the Children and Parents Code explicitly banning all forms of physical punishment or other emotionally abusive treatment of children. The result was 259 votes in favour, 6 against and 3 abstentions.⁴ All the political parties supported the amendment.

The amendment gained majority support but there were critics in Parliament who predicted that it would lead to a rise in parents being reported to the authorities and large numbers of Swedes being branded as criminals. Some critics claimed that the new law was contradicting the Christian faith. Some segments of the population also opposed the ban, even going so far as to petition the European Court of Human Rights to overturn it, claiming it infringed the right to respect for private and family life in article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. But the European Commission of Human Rights⁵ dismissed the application.⁶

The Parliamentary vote marked the end of one process and the start of another. The mission now was to ensure that the new legislation actually achieved the intended changes on behalf of children. The government launched an extensive publicity campaign that saw a Ministry of Justice brochure entitled “Can You Bring Up Children Successfully without Smacking and Spanking?”, distributed to all households with children. The brochure was translated into German, French, English, Arabic and various other languages, while parents were offered advice and support in how to bring up children without violence. Children’s and antenatal clinics joined the campaign to provide support and information to parents. Information about the issue was printed on milk cartons to encourage awareness and discussion in families. Save the Children Sweden and the child rights organisation BRIS held debates and printed posters to encourage discussion and raise awareness of the issue.

⁴ Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Sweden. 2001, Ending Corporal Punishment – Swedish Experience of Efforts to Prevent All Forms of Violence Against Children – And the Results

⁵ It was at that time a two-stage process and it was the Commission which declared the application inadmissible

⁶ Ewerlöf, Sverne, 1999, Barnets bästa – om föräldrars och samhällets ansvar



What does the law say?

In 1979 the Swedish Parliament voted to amend the Children and Parents Code to include a ban on physical punishment and humiliating treatment of children. Today it is regulated in Chapter 6, section 1 of the code, and it states:

“Children are entitled to care, security and a good upbringing. Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality and may not be subjected to corporal punishment or any other humiliating treatment.”

This law prohibits parents from using violence or emotionally abusive treatment when bringing up a child. But it does not prevent parents from restraining their children to prevent harm to themselves or others.

While the prohibition in the Children and Parents Code does not itself carry penalties, actions that meet the legal criteria of assault are subject to chapter 3, section 5 of the Penal Code, which states that a person who inflicts bodily injury, illness or pain upon another or renders him or her powerless or in a similar helpless state, shall be sentenced for assault to imprisonment for a maximum of two years or, if the crime is petty, to a fine or imprisonment of at most six months. If the offence is considered gross, the sentence is for gross assault and is for a minimum of one year up to a maximum of ten years, regardless of whether the victim is an adult or child.

The amendment to the Children and Parents Code underlined the fact that children are not excluded from the right of all human beings to protection from violence, and that parents and guardians cannot legitimately claim that use of force is an acceptable part of childrearing.

It is part of the social services assignment to ensure that children grow up in good and secure conditions. Social services are mandated to assess the child’s need for protection when they receive a report of alleged maltreatment. If they have sufficient evidence to believe that the child is being ill-

treated they are required to intervene to protect the child and avert any risk of further maltreatment. Thus, a child can receive help even if a police investigation does not lead to prosecution.

When it is alleged that an assault constituting a crime has been perpetrated against a child, the allegation is investigated by the police under the supervision of a public prosecutor. The police conduct the interviews and the public prosecutor decides whether to indict the accused. Sweden, like some other countries, has moved towards handling such cases in “children’s houses”, where police officers, prosecutors, social services, forensic scientists and child psychologists work closely together. The children’s house concept puts the needs of the child first with the aim of raising the quality of investigations to provide better evidence and a stronger basis for decisions. Housing different authorities and agencies under the same roof creates an unbroken chain that can provide children and their families with the support they need and to which they are entitled. Children and their families may need protection, support and assistance from social services and child psychiatry.

Anyone who, through their work with children and young people in the public or private sector receives information that a child may need protection is legally obligated to inform social services. Though the law only applies to people who work with children and adolescents, members of the public are urged under chapter 14, section 1, of the Social Services Act to notify social services if they suspect that a child is being maltreated:

“Any person receiving information of a matter that can imply a need for the social welfare committee to intervene for the protection of a child should notify the committee accordingly.”



What has been the result?

In 1981, two years after the anti-smacking ban was introduced – and following an unprecedented publicity campaign – more than 90 per cent⁷ of Swedish families were aware that the law had changed. But did the campaign also produce changes in values and actual behaviour? The Government Committee on Child Abuse⁸, concluded in its report “Child Assault – Prevention and Action” that most preschool children in the 1960s had been smacked by their parents once or several times per year, and that one third were smacked regularly. Figures from the 1970s indicate that less than 50 per cent of children experienced smacking during this era. During the 1980s this figure fell further to around one third. After 2000, data provided by parents suggests it is now down to just a few per cent. Not only has the number of children who are smacked fallen, but those who are still smacked experience this less often and only rarely with implements (1–1,5 per cent).

Not until 1994 were children themselves asked to say how often they were smacked at home. In 1994, 35 per cent said they had been smacked at some previous point in time, and after 2000 this figure has fallen considerably. One in ten of those who had been smacked said they were smacked regularly, and the same ratio said they were smacked with implements. Thus, schoolchildren born around 1990 say they are smacked considerably less often and with less force than children born ten years earlier.

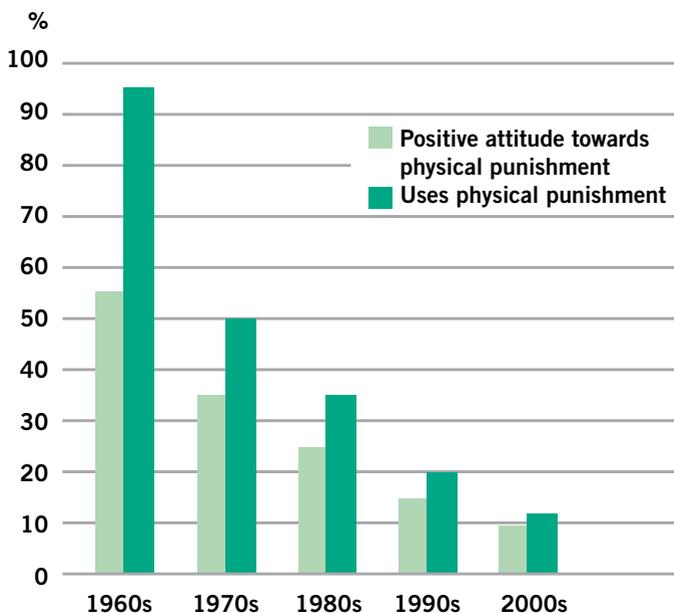
Interviews with parents in 1980, 2000 and 2006 reveal a sharp decline in the more serious forms of physical punishment, such as punching or use of implements. This means that forceful punishments with the potential to cause serious injury have decreased substantially.⁹

⁷ Ewerlöf, Sverne, 1999, Barnets bästa – om föräldrars och samhällets ansvar

⁸ SOU 2001:18, 2001, Barn och misshandel – En rapport om kroppslig bestraffning och annan misshandel i Sverige vid slutet av 1900-talet

⁹ Janson, Långberg, Svensson, 2007, Våld mot barn 2006–2007





Source: Våld mot barn 2006–2007, The Swedish Child Welfare Foundation and Karlstad University

The figure shows a steady decline in both percentages and numbers of parents who resort to physical punishment and who are positive to physical punishment, from the 1960s to the 2000s. It also shows a narrowing gap between the number of parents who are positive to physical punishment and the number who actually inflict physical punishment. In the 1960s, there was a wide gap between what respondents considered to be right and how they actually behaved: many thought it was wrong to use physical punishment but did so anyway. As time went by, people learned new ways to raise their children, gaining new insight and experiences that enabled them to dismantle old codes of behaviour. For every decade that passed, fewer children were subjected to physical punishment – and more parents stopped doing what they believed was wrong.

This shift is probably due to a variety of factors. Swedish society has seen many changes in the last 40 years. The welfare system has developed and greater equality between the sexes and generations has been gained in Swe-

den and Scandinavia than elsewhere in the world. Young children increasingly attend daycare centres outside the home, which facilitates the detection and prevention of child abuse. Antenatal and children's clinics have worked hard to raise awareness and introduce measures to prevent violence in families.

Cases of suspected assault on children reported to the police have increased since the early 1980s, rising by 190 per cent between 1990 and 1999.¹⁰ (Children and Assault – A Report on Physical Punishment and Other Abuse in Sweden in the Late 1990s). Opponents of law reform have claimed that this increase in reporting reflects an actual increase in assaults and use these figures to suggest that banning physical punishment increases child abuse. But this increase in reporting reflects the fact that tolerance of assaults on children has decreased, so people are more willing to inform the authorities about suspected cases. Violence that was once a family secret is more likely to be reported today because we are less likely to excuse or minimize instances of physical abuse of children by parents or others close to them.

Contrary to what the law's critics predicted in 1979 – and contrary to what today's opponents of law reform continue to predict, the proportion of reported assaults that are prosecuted has not increased. This is partly due to the fact that it is extremely difficult to obtain convictions for crimes committed within the four walls of a home where there are no witnesses other than the perpetrator and the child. The legal system does not allow a lower burden of proof in cases of assault on children than in other criminal cases.

But the fact that only a small proportion of child assault reports lead to prosecution does not mean that children and parents do not receive support or protection. Social services investigate all allegations of child maltreatment, assess the family's need for support and the child's need for protection and provide a range of supportive and preventive measures.

¹⁰ SOU 2001:18, 2001, Barn och misshandel – En rapport om kroppslig bestraffning och annan misshandel i Sverige vid slutet av 1900-talet

Why is physical punishment such an important issue?

Inflicting physical punishment on a child is an act of violence, whether it is smacking with the hand or pulling a child's hair or ears. Even when physical punishment does not leave visible marks, it is aimed at hurting children and scaring them into obedience.

Throughout history, children around the world have been subjected to violence for reasons claimed to be part of their upbringing and "for their own good". In a booklet entitled "Abolishing Corporal Punishment of Children – Questions and answers", the Council of Europe notes the inventiveness applied to finding other words for violence against children: smacking, slapping, spanking, and so on. According to the Council, "A loving smack" is a contradiction of the worst sort. *"The danger of making any connection between loving and hurting people should be obvious."*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees that children will be protected from all forms of violence, regardless of how adults attempt to justify it. Article 19 of the Convention states that:

"States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child."

The Committee that monitors countries' compliance with the Convention has made it clear that "violence" includes physical punishment, and that all ratifying countries have the obligation *"to move quickly to prohibit and eliminate all corporal punishment and all other cruel or degrading forms of punishment of children"* (General Comment No. 8).

All the 193 countries that have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child have acknowledged the responsibility of governments to guarantee the rights of every child within their jurisdiction. This responsibility does not stop at the front door to the family home. Although the family is and remains the most important unit for the child, it is also the most dangerous: the vast majority of cases of violence and abuse levelled at children are

perpetrated by people in the child's immediate environment. But the Convention does not call for punishment of parents or apprehension of children. Rather, it recognizes the obligation of ratifying countries to support parents in providing their children with the care they need:

*“Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern... For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities...”*¹¹

Over the past 50 years, the Swedish government has put into place a wide range of universal supports for parents, including generous parental leave, reduced workdays for parents of young children, sickness insurance for stay-at-home parents and housing allowances. In 2009 the Swedish government approved a new long-term national strategy to provide support and assistance to parents. It aims to increase the number of children who have positive relationships with their parents, thereby creating greater scope for children to enjoy good health and a good life. It also aims to promote child health and development while maximising protection from ill-health and social problems.

How can we raise children without hitting?

There is no *one* right way to raise children, because all children are different and have different needs. The Swedish government does not tell parents how to interact with their children. Parents or legal guardians are responsible for children and are an important source of support to them.

Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states the importance of the states to ensure that parents should give “appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.” Article 18 states that parents must put the child's best interests first.

¹¹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 18



Nonviolent childrearing does not mean the children are free to do whatever they want. Children depend on parental support and guidance. In order to become independent individuals, they need both freedom and boundaries.

During the post World War II debate on childrearing practices, a common objection against the advocates of nonviolent childrearing was that such childrearing would be tantamount to abandoning the children and letting them manage themselves. When Swedish paediatrician and reform pedagogue Mr. Gustav Jonsson during a radio debate in 1946 was asked if he, for instance, would let his son hammer a nail into his piano he answered that he would not let that happen. According to Mr. Jonsson that would be an example of complete misperception of what is known as free upbringing, by many referred to as no upbringing. He explained that this was not the point of the new ideas. The point was that there are different ways of saying no.

Anyone claiming that an upbringing free of violence and threats is equal to no upbringing at all can neither refer to the reform pedagogues of the 1940s, nor to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Childrearing without conflicts does not exist and there are no perfect parents. It's about developing a mutually respectful relationship. In the strong yet delicate relationship between child and parent, both parties are sometimes tired, angry or disappointed. You argue and you make up. It is the responsibility of the adult to teach the child how to solve conflicts without using violence, threats or intimidation.

It is the responsibility of the governments to create the necessary conditions for non-violent and non-abusive childrearing practices, as well as to provide the parents with the support and help they need in order to have the energy and time to be good role models for their children.

People who support physical punishment as a form of child-rearing sometimes claim that smacking is a quick and efficient way to get children to do what adults want. But the right to integrity – to respect for one's hu-

man rights – applies just as much to children as to adults. All children have a fundamental right to freedom from violence and emotionally abusive treatment.

Has there been an increase in youth crime?

Many adults used to believe (and a few probably still do) that youth crime can be combated through the use of force. Sometimes claims are even made that Swedish youth have been getting into trouble more since physical punishment was banned.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) keeps a close eye on youth crime as part of its role in producing data and distributing information on crime and crime prevention. The council reports that the available figures show a decrease in youth crime since the mid-1990s, due primarily to youngsters committing fewer theft and criminal damage offences. Participation in violent crime has remained relatively constant.¹² The vast majority of young people who commit a crime in Sweden do not end up becoming habitual criminals. The small group who do are responsible for a large proportion of offences.

In another report¹³, the council examines the research on risk factors leading to criminality. These factors include severe behavioural and attention disorders in children. The personality and behavioural patterns of a child develop in a constant interplay between genetic and environmental factors. The ability of parents to provide good care is crucial to the child's development. If parents have difficulty in developing strong emotional relationships with the child or are violent with the child, this increases the risk of the child developing serious psychosocial problems, which in turn increases the risk of the child engaging in criminal activity at a later point in time.

Criminal activity among young people and the vulnerability of young

¹² Brå (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention), 2008, *Brottsutvecklingen i Sverige fram till 2007*

¹³ Brå, 2001:15, *Kriminell utveckling – tidiga riskfaktorer och förebyggande insatser*



people to crime are issues under constant discussion in Sweden, as in many other countries. There is no indication from research that criminality is rising among young people, but we want to do all that we can to prevent that from happening. Identifying risk factors and improving preventive measures is an important task for researchers, government authorities and politicians.

The road ahead

The shift in attitude among Swedish parents away from violence stems from a mixture of legislation and public information campaigns. In most cases, parents do protect their children. But when they fail to do so, it is vital that the various authorities, including schools and preschools, social services and the police and civil society, work effectively together to guarantee the child's right to protection.

Regular surveys are carried out to monitor trends in violence against children in Sweden. These play an important role in enabling informed decisions to be made on necessary action. The work of combating violence against children is never finished: preventive measures and efforts to improve children's legal protection and rehabilitate and protect child victims of violence can never stand still.

The major achievements of Sweden's efforts came when parents stopped seeing smacking as a method of child-rearing and discovered alternative ways to solve conflicts with their children. Increased supports to parents and improved conditions for families have also likely played a role. But some parents are at higher risk for committing violence against their children than others. Some become violent because they feel alone, desperate, exhausted and helpless – or because they live under financial or other pressures. The highest risk of physical violence against children is where the male is violent against his partner. In these cases, children often suffer the double blow of suffering violence themselves and witnessing others suffer violence too. However, it is important to remember that we are talking about increased risk, not a predetermined outcome.

What the Swedish national studies of child abuse have proven is that the majority of parents who themselves were punished have been able to break this pattern. Nevertheless, providing support and backup to the most vulnerable parents is an important government task.¹⁴

Shared responsibility

No country in the world, no matter how affluent and well run, can easily provide children with the security and freedom from violence and abuse that is their right. Making this vision a reality demands dedication and courage from all adults who are close to children – parents, teachers, neighbours, relatives, friends and others.

Among the Swedish media coverage of the 30th anniversary of the abolition of corporal punishment in Sweden is a series of articles highlighting the moral courage needed to fight violence against children. In one article about people who have had the courage to intervene, 18-year-old Johanna explains what happened when she was out walking and heard shrieks from a garden where a father was hitting his son.

“The man was probably three times my size but I rushed straight in, she says. After a few moments the father pushed the boy, aged about nine, away.

– It’s against the law to do what you’re doing, Johanna said.

The man told her not to stick her nose into other people’s business. Hitting children was necessary, he said, adding:

– You don’t have any children of your own so you have no right to tell me how to parent my children.

Johanna replied that it hadn’t been long since she was a child herself.

– My parents didn’t hit me and I didn’t turn out too bad.

Then she told the man he had a lovely son and that he needed to be a role model for him.

The father calmed down.

– I know it’s wrong, he said. But sometimes it’s so difficult.”

¹⁴ Janson, Långberg, Svensson, 2007, Våld mot barn 2006–2007

Three years have passed since that summer's day. Johanna is 21 now and would not think twice about doing the same thing again. She is proud of the fact that she didn't just shout at the man, but tried to talk to him in a calm manner – and that the boy saw that she reacted.¹⁵

A civil society attentive to the children in its midst and a state that supports and helps parents and defends children's rights in law are preconditions for carrying on the never-ending task of protecting the right of all children to grow up without ever experiencing physical or mental violence.

¹⁵ Aftonbladet, 8 april 2009, Hjältarna som aldrig tvekar



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Can I be a good Muslim/Christian/Jew in a country that forbids physical punishment?

– Of course. Our Prophet Mohammed is our role model and he never hit anyone, neither child nor adult. The Prophet Mohammed taught us that for seven years we shall play with our children. For seven years we shall teach them. And for seven years we shall be their friend and companion.

Abdallah Salah,

Chairman of the Islamic Association in Stockholm

– To exercise violence against a child is unthinkable for a Christian. Jesus gives a very sharp warning to anyone who harms a child and also says about the children: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me"

Sven-Bernhard Fast,

General Secretary of the Christian Council of Sweden

– No law of the Jewish Religion decrees physical punishment of children. It stands to reason that modern Jews repudiate all degrading treatment of children.

Morton Narowe

Chief Rabbi Emeritus



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