I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to give evidence on this important Bill, and the opportunity to submit additional written evidence.

As the lead author of a report on physical punishment that was published in 2015, I have together with my co-authors undertaken a comprehensive review of the international evidence on the impact of physical punishment on children's health and well-being.¹ This review was commissioned by leading children’s charity organisations (NSPCC Scotland, Children 1st, Barnardo's Scotland, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland) to inform the debate in Scotland.

Removing the defence of reasonable punishment was the number one policy recommendation we have made in our report. The evidence is clear and consistent – physical punishment has the potential to cause significant harm and carries the risk of escalation into physical abuse. It is also a clear violation of children's human rights as outlined in the UNCRC. Therefore I cannot overstate the importance of the proposed legislation. My co-authors and I very much welcome the legislative proposal and commitment by the Scottish Government to end the physical punishment of children in Scotland.

In the following I am summarising the key findings and recommendations from our review. In addition, I would like to highlight two relevant studies that have been published since publication of our report.

Summary of the ‘Equally protected’ review

Our review addressed three questions:

1. What are the prevalence of / attitudes towards parental physical punishment in the UK and other OECD countries?
2. What is the impact of physical punishment on child health and development, and later-life health and wellbeing?
3. Is parental use of physical punishment related to an increased risk of child maltreatment?

To answer these questions, we undertook a systematic search of the international literature published between 2005 and 2015.

Prevalence of / attitudes towards parental physical punishment

Physical punishment is still common in the UK: Data from large representative studies\(^2\) showed that between 50% and 60% of parents with children aged between 5 and 7 reportedly used ‘smacking’ as a parenting strategy. At the same time, parents reported negative attitudes towards the use of physical punishment. More than 80% of parents of 4-year-olds who participated in the 2006 Growing Up in Scotland Study said that smacking is ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ useful.

There is a dearth of data on time trends in relation to the prevalence of physical punishment in the UK. The existing evidence stems from one study and suggests a decline of physical punishment between the 1980s and the 1990s.

An important finding from our review of cross-country studies on the effects of legislation was that legal bans of physical punishment are associated with accelerated declines in prevalence as well as public acceptance. There is convincing evidence that the passage of legislation in combination with public awareness campaigns leads to a change in public attitudes.

Impact of physical punishment on child health and wellbeing

I would like to emphasise a number of important points in relation to the methodology of our review. Some research on physical punishment has received criticism for not distinguishing between physical punishment and physical abuse, and for using cross-sectional study designs that cannot establish the direction of any associations between the punishment and the outcome in question. For example, it has been argued in the past that associations between physical punishment and problem behaviour may be due to reverse causation, that is, children whose behaviour is perceived as difficult being more likely to be physically punished.

We have addressed these methodological issues in our review by:

a) excluding studies that had included forms of abuse or maltreatment in their definition of physical punishment\(^3\), and

b) by only including prospective (longitudinal) studies on the impact of physical punishment on children’s health and development, i.e. studies that followed the same children over time and collected data at least at two time points.

Using these criteria, we identified 74 prospective studies and 2 review articles on the impact of physical punishment on child health and wellbeing, and later life outcomes. We judged the majority of these studies to be of good quality.

The vast majority (42 out of 55) of studies on externalising behaviour\(^4\), and the two reviews, found that physical punishment was associated with increases in aggression and antisocial behaviour over time, after adjusting for initial levels of the behaviour in question.

\(^2\) Data sources: 2006 Millennium Cohort Study (Scottish participants), and 2012/13 Growing Up in Scotland Study


\(^4\) Externalising behaviour is defined as negative behaviour directed at the external environment.
Studies with data on the frequency of physical punishment tended to find a dose-response relationship: the more frequently physical punishment was used or the longer the time period over which it occurred, the worse was the subsequent externalising problem behaviour.

Another important finding was that physical punishment and externalising problem behaviour reinforced each other. Eleven out of the 14 studies that examined such reciprocal effects across several time points found that initial problem behaviour increased the risk of physical punishment, which in turn was related to worse problem behaviour down the line, which then increased the risk of harsher punishment, which then again led to even worse behaviour – thus fuelling a vicious cycle.

Although less strong than for externalising behaviour, there was good evidence that physical punishment is harmful also for children’s emotional and mental health, increasing the risk of depressive symptoms, anxiety and emotional problems.

Further, the literature showed fairly consistent evidence for links between physical punishment experienced in childhood and aggression or antisocial behaviour in later life, as well as evidence for links with adult mental illness and adult substance misuse.

**Link between physical punishment and child maltreatment**

We also looked at the link between physical punishment and child maltreatment. We identified six individual studies and one review paper, all of which concluded that physical punishment (in forms that were legally permissible) was linked to an increased risk of child maltreatment.

An important issue to highlight here is the difficulty of making a qualitative distinction between physical punishment and physical abuse, as exemplified by the varying definitions of abuse that were adopted in studies from different countries. This suggests that such definitions are shaped by societal attitudes. In our view, both physical punishment and physical abuse are part of a continuum of violence, differing only by severity or degree.

**The policy recommendations made in our report**

1. All physical punishment of children should be prohibited by law.

2. Legislation should be accompanied by large-scale information and awareness campaigns to inform the population of the merits of positive parenting and the harm caused by physical punishment. These should be aimed at different levels: individuals, communities and the whole population.

3. It is important to support parents in using positive parenting strategies, through providing information via different channels (e.g. via GP’s, health visitors, schools, mass media), as well as through offering parenting programmes.

4. Organisations and professionals concerned about child welfare, including teaching, health and social care professionals, as well as charity organisations, need to be galvanised and should engage in advocacy and lobby strategies to call on policymakers for an urgent change in legislation to end all physical punishment of children.
Relevant evidence that became available after publication of our review

Since publication of our report in 2015, a further systematic review has been published. This review included 75 studies. The authors conducted meta-analyses for each of 17 different outcome measures. 99% of the statistically significant effect sizes indicated an association between corporal punishment and a detrimental outcome. Being a victim of physical abuse was the outcome for which the overall effect size was largest. The authors concluded that “there is no evidence that spanking does any good for children and all evidence points to the risk of it doing harm”.

Another relevant study was published in 2018. This ecological study examined associations between corporal punishment bans and youth violence at country level, using data from 88 countries. It found that national bans of corporal punishment in all settings were associated with less frequent physical fighting among adolescents.

Concluding remarks

In sum, the evidence for detrimental effects of physical punishment is vast and importantly, it is consistent. Physical punishment is not effective in achieving parenting goals. It tends to make difficult behaviour worse and carries a serious risk of escalation into injurious abuse. It declines faster in countries where it is prohibited. It violates children’s human rights and has no place in a modern society.

Dr Anja Heilmann

21 February 2019

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