As an expert in childhood experiences of domestic abuse, it is a source of considerable concern to me that the use of smacking in childhood is regarded as permissible under the justification of ‘reasonable chastisement’. As a country committed to recognising children’s rights, it is bewildering to me to see such an overt violation of children’s right to physical integrity and protection from harm is so routinely overlooked.

There is convincing evidence that physical punishment in childhood is part of a continuum of broader family violence and domestic abuse (Grogan-Kaylor, Ma and Graham-Bermann, 2018). In a sample of 758 young adults in Texas Temple et al. (2018) found that childhood experiences of smacking was strongly associated with perpetration of dating violence, even after controlling for factors like child abuse, parental education and socioeconomic status. Children who are spanked are significantly more likely to engage in physical violence towards their mothers (Lyons et al., 2015). Surveying young adults about their childhood experiences, (Fréchette, Zoratti and Romano, 2015) found those who were smacked were more likely to also experience more impulsive and uncontrolled parental discipline, and parental domestic violence. Although it is difficult to establish causal links between domestic abuse and smacking, there is extensive evidence of association. Afifi et al. (2017) found that childhood experiences of smacking predicted likelihood of women being victims of domestic abuse, perhaps because it is associated with a normalisation of physical attack. Globally, there is an association between attitudes that are tolerant of domestic abuse and endorsement of the use of smacking (Lansford et al, 2014).

Evidence also suggests that children who are subject to physical punishment are at risk of negative developmental outcomes. Perhaps the most concerning finding in recent research is that smacking has the same health consequences as physical and emotional abuse in childhood. Affi et al (2017) explored whether experience of smacking predicted similar health outcomes to those associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences. Using the CDC Kaiser data base, they found that smacking grouped together with the four physical and emotional abuse items. Smacking was associated with suicidality, and substance abuse, and that it had additional weight separate from its association with the other abuse items. They concluded that smacking functions in a similar way to child physical and emotional abuse, in predicting negative health outcomes and that smacking also intensified the impact of other forms of abuse, suggesting that for this reason, it should be regarded as another ACE. Smacking has also been associated with risk of major depression in adulthood and antisocial acts (Afifi et al., 2006).

Using the Millennium Cohort Study data set (Rajyaguru et al., 2019) found that smacking and harsh parenting practices were associated with emotional difficulties in children aged 3-11. (Scott et al., 2014) found the children smacked whilst babies and toddlers were more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioural difficulties in the early years. Regardless of whether it was ‘harsh’ or ‘mild’, physical punishment is associated with educational disengagement and increased peer (Font and Cage, 2018). In a multinational study, Alampay et al. (2017) found that physical punishment was
associated with problem behaviours in children. Whilst some parents might justify their use of smacking suggesting that smacking ‘done with love’ is not the same as abuse, this was not borne out in this study, which found that neither severity of the punishment, nor perceptions of whether the punishment was fair, moderated its impact. This is confirmed by Xing and Wang (2017), who found that parental warmth does not mediate the impact of smacking on children’s problem behaviours, and there is a strong link between parental use of smacking and the development of behavioural problems.

Although it is sometimes suggested that smacking will not have negative consequences in contexts where it is culturally normal parenting practice, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016), in a meta-analysis on 5 studies incorporating 111814 white and 3065 black children found no evidence that ethnic background reduced the negative mental health consequences of smacking.

Experiencing smacking as a child is also associated with an increase in aggressive behaviour in childhood and adulthood. Russell et al. (2018) found a strong relationship between being smacked, and use of physical and verbal aggression, and expressions of anger and hostility in adult life. In a large 15 nation survey of adult behaviours and retrospective accounts of childhood smacking, (Rebellon and Straus, 2017) found a strong relationship between the use of CP, reduced self-control in adulthood and increased anti-social behaviour. In global terms, countries that have a smacking ban tend to have lower rates of youth violence (Gariépy et al., 2018). However, it is unclear whether this association is linked to the banning of smacking itself, or whether smacking bans are more likely in cultures with a low tolerance for physical violence.

It may be important to consider the impact of other forms of family violence (e.g. domestic abuse) and parental mental health challenges on potential to use physical punishment (Bhona et al., 2016). Given that parenting is a form of emotional labour, it is particularly sensitive to stress, and for parents who are themselves experiencing physical violence or coercive control, high levels of stress or mental health challenges, it is probably important that the first line of response to smacking not be criminalisation or child protection intervention. Grogan-Kaylor, Ma and Graham-Bermann, (2018) found that mothers’ use of smacking was often linked to a sense of marginalisation and disempowerment, and that interventions that empowered women moderated the likelihood that they would use physical forms of punishment.

In balance, psychological evidence clearly supports the proposed removal of the justification of reasonable chastisement. Research indicates that physical punishment has negative mental health, behavioural and attainment outcomes, and there seems to be no research evidence that indicates it has any positive outcomes. Research also suggests there is a link between smacking and other forms of child abuse, as well as involvement in abusive relationships in adult life. Based on this evidence, there appears to be no good reason to retain the defence of reasonable chastisement, and doing so places children in Scotland at risk.
References


