

## **BCASW Child Welfare Committee Response on Child Discipline**

The British Columbia Association of Social Workers (BCASW) commends the position the Vancouver Sun took in an editorial published on February 10, 2012. The editorial highlighted the “Trouble with Spanking” and referenced a study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) released on February 6, 2012. The Vancouver Sun emphasized that such “studies suggest that a causal relationship between spanking and aggressive behaviour really does exist”.

The BCASW Child Welfare Committee endorses the CMAJ 2012 meta-study conducted by Canadian researcher Joan Durrant of the University of Manitoba and Social Worker Ron Ensom of the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario, highlighting the negative effects of physical punishment. The research team analyzed 20 years of academic research published on the topic of corporal punishment and present these key findings:

- Numerous studies have found that physical punishment increases the risk of broad and enduring negative developmental outcomes;
- No study has found that physical punishment enhances developmental health;
- Most child physical abuse occurs in the context of punishment;
- A professional consensus is emerging that parents should be supported in learning nonviolent, effective approaches to discipline (Durrant & Ensom, 2012, p. 1).

Durrant & Enson show that the “risks associated with physical punishment are robust” and they contend that “physicians familiar with the research can now confidently encourage parents to adopt constructive approaches to discipline”.

In 1951, the Montreal Gazette published a report by Harvard scientist, Professor Robert R. Sears, who determined that while physical punishment may appear to be effective as a discipline because it can reduce or stop unwanted behaviour in the short-term, children who received corporal punishment tended to “bottle up their hostilities” (Blakeslee, 1951, p. 14). Professor Sears believed that these bottled up hostilities could lead to social violence; such as gossiping, blaming and bullying. This Harvard research study failed to influence the politics of child discipline. In 2003, Canada ratified legislation that permits ‘reasonable force’ in the discipline of children, also known as the “spanking law”. The agency *Justice for Children and Youth* explains that currently in Canada, “a teacher may use reasonable force to ‘guide a child’, and a parent (or person standing in for parent, i.e. a foster parent or child care provider) may spank a child who is older than two, younger than 12, provided they do not use an object, or hit the child in the head, do not humiliate the child and do not use corporal punishment on children with disabilities that render them without the capacity to learn”.

Social workers are aware that positive discipline—those parental interactions that are not punitive, violent or harmful, but rather “bring life to learning”—require more time, effort and planning. Positive discipline skills are worth the effort to develop. Non-violent communication and natural consequences contribute to the healthy development of children’s self-esteem, trust and empathy.

One goal of BCASW’s Child Welfare Committee is to support, make accessible and promote positive parenting practices. We recognize that many parents rely on multi-generational

discipline practices that have included corporal punishment. Parent education is sometimes viewed negatively and parents may hope that ‘common sense’ and an “iron hand” are enough to guide them through the complexities of technology, proliferation of multi-media sources and peer-pressure. Without coaching, support and skill development, it can be challenging for parents to act on positive choices in discipline. For information on positive parenting techniques, please contact your nearest community social service agency for more information.

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