

Pediatricians taking new look at corporal-punishment issue

When disciplining children, what is the difference between “reasonable” and “unreasonable” force? This contentious question was left unanswered in January when the Ontario Court of Appeal upheld a Criminal Code provision dating back to 1892 that allows parents and teachers to spank children for disciplinary purposes. The 3 judges refused to outlaw any particular forms of hitting. Instead, they recommended that caregivers should not hit a teenager or child under 2 or use an object such as a belt or ruler when applying corporal punishment, and should avoid slapping or striking a child’s head.

The decision was a blow for those who want a legal ban on the use of corporal punishment. “As long as people think the use of force is their God-given right, it is less likely that they will look at alternative modes of parenting,” said Marvin Bernstein, spokesperson for the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies.

However, that court decision will not end the debate because a controversial case involving the same issue comes to trial in May. In 2001, 6 children aged 6 to 14 were taken from their home in Aylmer, Ont., because their parents were using a paddle to spank them. The parents, who belong to the fundamentalist Church of God, believe the Bible directs them, in *Proverbs* 13:24, to use a strap or stick: “He that spareth the rod, hateth his son.” In May, the province will argue that the children need the state’s protection against inappropriate disciplinary measures.

Among Canadians, there is little support for a change in the law. According to a Leger poll released in February, 70% of respondents answered “No” when asked: “Should the government pass legislation to ban parents from spanking their children?” About half the respondents thought that “a light slap” was an effective response.

Dr. Joan Durrant, a psychologist in the University of Manitoba’s Family Studies Department, says that assumption is not supported by the facts. Several international studies have shown that corporal punishment does not help children internalize rules of behaviour.

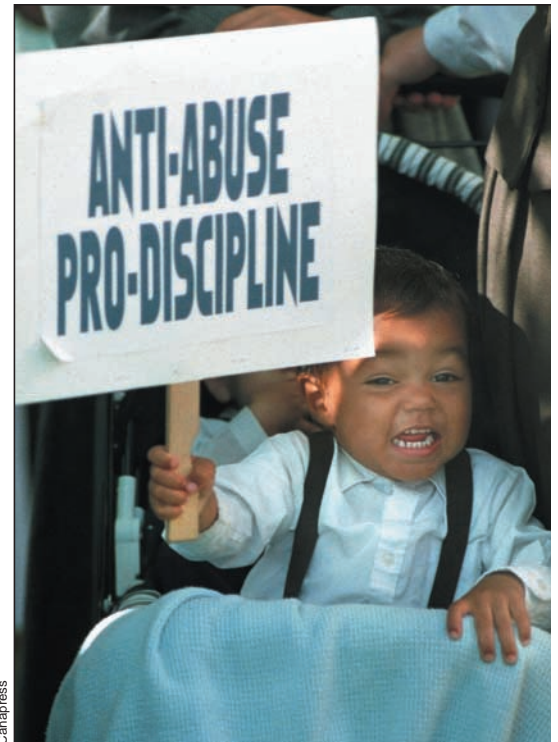
Instead, it is more likely to persuade them that violence is legitimate. Moreover, there is no hard-and-fast definition of “reasonable force.”

To provide some guidance for parents, Durrant coauthored a 12-page booklet in 1995 that eventually proved so popular that 70 000 copies were ordered by social service agencies. The booklet, *Spanking: Should I or Shouldn’t I?*, addressed questions such as: “If we stop spanking, won’t we lose control of our kids?”

“Most people who were physically punished as children did not, as adults, consider themselves abused,” observes Durrant. A large American study showed that 49% of adults who as children had been hit with 5 different types of implements, and 44% of those who had been injured at least twice, did not label themselves abused. As for the psychological impact of corporal punishment, a 1999 study by Dr. Harriet MacMillan and colleagues found that there “appears to be a linear association between the frequency of slapping and spanking during childhood and a lifetime prevalence of anxiety disorder, alcohol abuse or dependence and externalizing problems [*CMAJ* 1999;161(7): 805-9].”

For health care professionals, the challenge is to distinguish between issues of law and issues of good disciplinary practice. In 2000, the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) reaffirmed its 1996 position paper, *Effective Discipline for Children*, which recommended that discipline should aim to change children’s behaviour, not punish them. The statement discouraged the use of spanking and recommended nonphysical forms of discipline such as reasoning and “time out.”

The CPS Psychosocial Paediatrics Committee is currently reviewing the research on disciplinary spanking with a view to issuing a new statement later this year. Dr. Sarah Shea, a Halifax pediatrician and CPS board member who sits on that committee, says the issue has sparked vigorous debate. “As much as possible today, we are all looking for hard evidence on which to base any opinion or statement. But there isn’t the



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Corporal punishment became a hot issue last summer when 7 children were removed from the home of members of the Church of God in St. Thomas, Ont.

kind of evidence we would like on this issue because it doesn’t lend itself to randomized trials.”

Shea says the CPS must consult the full range of experts and balance the available evidence against societal norms and values before it issues an official statement. “The process itself is very important. And there is no question that public attitudes toward minor forms of violence are shifting. Look at the new policies of zero tolerance that some schools have instituted for schoolyard violence.”

Shea, a mother of 3, says she personally does not see any need for corporal punishment, including spanking. “I believe there are other, more effective methods of providing consequences for inappropriate behaviour. As parents and as a society, we want to raise children who share the view that violence is not the solution to anything. And that teaching has to begin in the home.” — *Charlotte Gray, Ottawa*