

Smacking children 1:

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There have been few periods in history where the issue of children's 'rights' vis a vis responsibilities of adults have been as widely debated as they are at present. It is possible that this debate is a direct result of events such as the Orkney and Cleveland child abuse enquiries. The revelation that a great deal of child abuse occurs within the nuclear family itself (The Guardian, 1994a; 1994b) or in the very institutions (The Guardian, 1992c; 1994d) that are ostensibly set up to defend the most vulnerable individuals in society (i.e., our children) has sent shock waves through society. There is now an increasing awareness that those who abuse children are attracted to the kind of professions that give them unrestricted access to potential child victims e.g., Social Work (The Guardian, 1992b), Priesthood (The Guardian, 1993a), Teaching (The Guardian, 1992a; 1993b), Nursery staff (1993c), Youth Work (The Guardian, 1992a), etc. (DHSS, 1993; Kirkwood, 1993)

The debate about the rights and protection of children is not entirely new. Historically, this campaign is part of an ongoing struggle of humanity to achieve equal rights that has included, for example, the right to religious freedom, equality before the law, worker's rights, freedom of speech, national self-determination, anti-slavery, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, sexual freedom, woman's liberation, and disability awareness. The central concern in each of these domains is the expansion of the realm of human freedom. This involves increasing our understanding about who and what controls us and what methods are used (cf. Holland, 1978). With respect to children, the issue of control is centred around the behaviour of the parent(s) or substitute parents.

Clearly the social and physical environment that children experience influences what kind of the adult they will become. Consequently, each generation should give the next generation (i.e., all their children) the very best in terms of education and freedom from abuse. Undoubtedly,

we would all agree that the world's children should have the kind of childhood that makes them responsible and non-abusing adults.

The statement of this aim is one thing, the achievement of it, however, is an entirely different matter. We are in the closing stages of a century that brought images of wars and mass starvation closer to us than ever before. Television and other media reports bring the desperation and endless suffering of child victims to our living rooms. The world is in a mess and it is the responsibility of our generation (the parents of the world's children) to help prepare for the next generations. In this paper a start is made by addressing issues that have arisen in the debate about smacking children. In particular, a recent article in *The Irish Psychologist* by Lynn (1993) demands serious attention.

Lynn provided a series of arguments in support of the necessity and effectiveness of the physical punishment of children by adults. The scientific validity of Lynn's arguments is highly disputable and we are setting the scene here for the reprint of a thorough rebuttal provided by Dillenburger and Keenan (1994), also in *The Irish Psychologist*.

Educating children - a question of philosophy

Attitudes to educating children can be usefully divided into two camps. One approach stems from a religious/philosophical position that espouses something akin to the notion of 'original sin' i.e., that children are born with an innate tendency to act in evil ways and that this should be exorcised by (usually physical) punishment. This view tends to see the world through the eyes of adults only and denies the legitimacy and value of a child's eye-view.

An alternative viewpoint holds that children are born neither good nor evil but simply with human needs. This viewpoint holds that a human child enters the world in a state of helplessness, completely dependent on older humans to meet those needs. If these needs go unrecognised, or are devalued and ridiculed, the child's emotional, physical and social well-being could very well be in danger. We are arguing here for this latter viewpoint.

Problems with physical punishment

Along with a child's need to be fed, watered, and kept clean there is the need to learn about the world and how to behave in it. The learning process operates best in an environment that encourages

experimentation and exploration without imposing unnecessary fear and anxiety. Those who advocate the use of physical punishment base their arguments on the notion that fear or anxiety teach a child that certain mis-behaviours are not acceptable and are therefore best avoided. However, an obvious problem with physical punishment is that it has to hurt, otherwise it is ineffective. In suggesting that children need to be deliberately hurt to learn, we are forced into the position where we have to hurt the children we love because we love them. That is, we have to hurt them because we are concerned for their proper education. This argument brings with it the pressure to escalate punishments if they prove ineffective or elicit rebellion (even though such resistance could be seen in a positive light as a legitimate form of self defence).

An even bigger problem with physical punishment as a method of changing behaviour is that it doesn't produce the desired effect.

The fact is that the research literature on hitting children contains not one single piece of data suggesting that physical punishment is effective. Indeed the literature tells us that hitting, imprisoning and humiliating children is not only wrong, it is useless and dangerous with children today and tends to produce violent adults tomorrow. (Scottish Child, June/July 1992, p.13)

Smacking a child who exhibits an undesired behaviour may stop that behaviour at that moment, but it does not increase the likelihood of future improvements in behaviour. The child knows it has done wrong, but it is usually not told or shown what is the desired behaviour. Indeed, a child who is crying and sobbing after a smack would probably not hear such instructions anyway. It is also probably feeling far too tense after a smack to learn the appropriate behaviour. Furthermore, from a child's perspective, physical punishment is often unpredictable and is usually experienced as a loss of control on the part of the parent. This makes physical punishment a crude, non specific tool that may cause a lot of 'collateral damage.'

The many negative consequences of the physical punishment of children may not (if ever) be recognised until the child reaches adulthood. One problem that may arise earlier is an increase in aggressive behaviour in the child. Children have a stronger tendency to model themselves on the significant adults around them than on anybody else. Those who see

violence being used as a method for solving problems and who lack alternative strategies will use violence as a first option when they find themselves in difficult situations.

...as long ago as 1977 the UK. Association of Education Psychologists told the British Department of Education and Science that "Children who are beaten tend in turn to beat and bully. (Scottish Child June/July 1992, p.14)

Why the wounded punish others

If we wish to develop and promote humanistic, nurturing and truly educational methods of bringing up our children, it is not enough to blame punishing parents. Parents who, often in desperation, use physical punishment may find their own behaviour disturbing. They often feel guilty and frustrated about the fact that they lost their temper and could not control their own child. In other words, they are not necessarily bad people but if they insist on using physical punishment they must be considered as inefficient educators . Children identify with their parents or carers as part of the bonding process. They tend to see their adult carers as 'good' whatever they do. Consequently, if they are smacked, hit, or beaten by these people it must be because it is they (the child) who is 'bad.' Even very badly abused children will make up excuses for their abusers and blame their own wickedness. Later on when they are adults themselves they minimise the effects of this punishment by declaring that "I got smacked as a child and it never did me any harm" (Miller, 1984).

It is often assumed that adults who were abused as children will defend and not abuse children in their care because of their own unpleasant experiences. While this may be true for many, unfortunately it does not necessarily follow for all. Confronted with a child expressing its own anger or needs, these adults may feel powerless and overwhelmed by the situation. This can lead to the repetition of their own childhood experience where they use physical punishment on their own children.

Towards Freedom and Dignity

For human relationships to develop in healthy ways there is a need to be intimate with, and therefore vulnerable to, other human beings. An

adult, who as a child repressed emotions because they were frightening, may experience difficulty in sustaining relationships that involve intimacy. Being open and vulnerable with another adult means no longer repressing one's deepest emotions. Long repressed fear, hurt and anger may be re-experienced at times with all the awesome power they had for the child. This is extremely difficult for any individual to face.

To many people it seems easier to take medication, to smoke, drink alcohol, preach, educate or treat others and prepare wars than to expose themselves to their own painful truth.
(Miller, 1990, p. 148)

As part and parcel of wrestling with our own demons we may find that we have aggressive, hurting emotions. We may even feel that we are forced by others stronger than ourselves to get quick results by force. However, we must refuse to appease the powerful and show solidarity with the powerless. We need to consistently question ourselves if we feel the need to physically hurt those more vulnerable than ourselves. In confronting the punisher within ourselves we will be able to act with love and thus secure the future for ourselves and our children.

Science and Love working together

One thing all parents know is that at the end of the day it is important that a child feels loved. Although love can't be defined simply, it can come about only as a consequence of what parents do, their actual behaviour. This means that parent's must be attentive to the effects that their own behaviour has on their children. Only then can they ensure that they rear their children effectively and provide them with loving experiences. Interestingly, the original meaning of the word "experience" was "to travel through." From the child's perspective, the nature of the impact of the early years of his/her journey through life is determined by the guidance and control provided by his/her parents. That is to say, many of the changes that take place in a child are brought about by consequences for his/her behaviour that are supplied by parents. Parents who strive to be aware of the effects of their behaviour on a child can be helped by a science that is intimately concerned with the consequences of behaviour. In Dillenburger and Keenan's paper which follows, some of the basic findings of such a science, Behaviour Analysis, are outlined.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the findings of such a science might be welcomed with open arms by any prospective parent or educator. However, it is well known to this audience that this is not the case! A cry that is often heard is that we should not teach persons to manipulate their children, and that using methods derived from the principles associated with applied behaviour analysis would do just that. But child rearing practices based on these principles are not new. The principles of behaviour that have been uncovered by behaviour analysis are always in operation, whether we consciously apply them or accidentally let them happen.

People have always taught and learned complex behaviours through these methods; the laws of learning have "not suddenly changed in the last few decades." It is only our ability to analyze, isolate, name and teach the components of the art of teaching that is new.

To paraphrase Skinner [see "Beyond Freedom and Dignity," *Psychology Today*, August 1971], it is not a matter of whether parents will use behavior-modification techniques to manipulate their children, but rather whether they will use these techniques unconsciously with unknown, unchosen and unhappy results, or use them consciously, efficiently and consistently to develop the qualities they choose for their children.

(R. P. Hawkins, *Psychology Today*, Nov. 1972, p. 40)

Teaching about Behaviour Analysis

The accurate dissemination of the facts of behaviour gathered by behavioural scientists is crucial for the development of effective parenting skills. However, before one can fully embrace the approach taken by behaviour analysis to the understanding of behaviour, it is essential to adopt a new perspective on the term 'control.' As suggested above, a positive view of this term encompasses the desire to understand how best to arrange consequences for a person's behaviour. This is particularly important in the case of discipline problems in children.

People who defend the use of smacking in such cases are, in a sense, pawns/victims of a culture that is generally unable to address the issue of control in a positive manner.

When psychologists advocate coercion as a form of education, they forget that they themselves would not wish to be subjected to the consequences of such action. If they bore this thought in mind, then they might try to find other ways to counteract the effects of a learning history that was responsible for discipline problems in a child. The humanistic foundations of behaviour analysis (Newman, 1992) function as a guiding light for exploring new techniques.

The central point of Dillenburger and Keenan's argument is that we should redirect our use of the term discipline so that it refers to the disciplined application of behavioural procedures. Deliberately anchoring the term 'discipline' in the behaviour of the scientist like this ensures that the application of positive means to control behaviour is not dismissed as wishy-washy liberal idealism. The decision not to smack a child should not automatically be equated with letting them get away with all sorts of misbehaviour. On the contrary, keeping a tight reign on the management of behaviour is hard work but it eventually pays off.

It would be wrong to suggest that Lynn's article in any way advocated seriously abusing children in the usual sense of the word. However, the consequences of his behaviour do nothing to educate and persuade others to explore new ways of controlling children other than by hitting them. The discipline required to adequately present the principles of behaviour has been lacking in this instance. No doubt this state of affairs can be partly accounted for by the fact that behavioural and non-behavioural scientists read different books. However, there is more to it than this.

There are many difficulties involved in teaching the basic principles of behaviour. Most students, for example, have difficulties with the range of technical terms that are used. While this is also the case when one begins the study of any natural science, these difficulties are compounded by a number of other factors. Foremost amongst these is the damage done through misrepresentation by misinformed teachers at universities. Usually, the token behaviour analyst in British psychology departments is dismissed as "one of those rat runners" while the science generally is often derisively viewed as "only useful for animals and people with learning difficulties." Given that focal point of the work conducted by behaviour analysts is concerned with improving our awareness

regarding the consequences of behaviour, it is a curious fact that they generally get a pretty rough ride.

Given this general context for the teaching of behaviour analysis, it is perhaps not surprising that a psychologist would devote an article in support of hitting children without considering the variety of alternative ways that have been developed for facilitating learning. By way of emphasising the difficulties involved in persuading professionals to disseminate behavioural principles, it is worth noting that Lynn repeated much of his original arguments in a BBC television discussion on smacking children subsequent to the first publication of the paper by Dillenburg and Keenan. The republication of the article by Dillenburg and Keenan is perhaps one way to provide consequences for this lack of discipline on his part.

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