

Spanking is not child abuse

Monday, June 25, 2007

Andrea Mrozek and Dave Quist

Parents know the difference between spanking as a disciplinary measure and child abuse: In the first, a loving parent uses some small, symbolic level of force as an incremental measure among others when a child misbehaves; in the latter, a child is subjected to violent force for no reason, or to vicious verbal assaults, or neglect. Even parents who would never spank their own children understand that difference.

And yet this baffles the Senate. They are currently working to remove section 43 from the Criminal Code, which allows parents to spank their children. By removing it, they aim to teach us that spanking is always wrong, and newly illegal -- that it constitutes child abuse. In hearing witness testimony on June 18, Senator Sharon Carstairs said, "I define 'abuse' as hitting a child." Senator Jim Munson said, "there is no such thing to me as reasonable force." He went on: "You either hit a child or do not hit a child, no matter how hard you hit." It's all very clear: Spanking is always harmful and ought to be banned.

Spanking remains a point of controversy among parents, which is precisely where it should be discussed. In short, this is not a matter for the legislature or Senate. Parenting is by its very nature best left up to, well, parents. Because they -- by and large -- are concerned first and foremost with their children's welfare.

However, if spanking is abuse, it would not be enough to argue that we must keep the state out of the playrooms of the nation. If this were true, it might indeed warrant action, not necessarily from the state because parenting is not a government mandate, but from parents themselves.

So for those interested in studies and statistics, the evidence is in: Spanking as a disciplinary tool is -- drum roll please -- neutral. It is not accurate to say that spanking necessarily has negative repercussions. In fact there is some evidence from reputable studies that it is, as always, done appropriately -- gasp -- good. In one meta-analysis published in the *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* in 2005, the conclusion was that spanking was a decidedly neutral tool, and child outcomes depended on how spanking was used -- except in one case, where "physical discipline" proved to be positive. "(O)ne study favour(ed) physical discipline for reducing drug abuse," the researchers write. "They also identified an optimal type of physical discipline, called conditional spanking, which led to better child outcomes than 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary tactics," the study reads.

A 30-year longitudinal study on the effects of spanking in New Zealand, published in 2006, showed no negative effects of spanking and, furthermore, that those who had been spanked "appeared to be particularly high-functioning and achieving members of society."

Negative memories or emotions should not take the upper hand in our Upper Chamber. The premise for the Senate's bill that spanking is always bad, and that it constitutes or leads to abuse, is disputed. No other body than the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 2004 that parents had the right to use "reasonable force," while at the same time, it placed some restrictions on its use.

2001 – 130 rue Albert Street Ottawa Ontario Canada K1P 5G4

T 613.565.3832 f/t 613.565.3803 1.866.373.4632

www.imfcanada.org

There are unintended consequences to this bill. For one, such a law cannot be easily enforced and would require neighbour to spy upon neighbour: Recent reports from Sweden, where spanking was outlawed in 1979, suggest not only is spanking on the rise there, but the state has no way to control it. There is also evidence there of a rise in youth violence for those raised after the spanking ban, the cause of which deserves further examination before other countries replicate their example.

Worst of all, this bill is a slap in the face to children truly suffering abuse. If a carefully thought-out swat on the bum as part of a wider discipline plan is the same thing as child abuse, then fighting real child abuse just got a whole lot more difficult. Efforts will be diverted from combating truly despicable behaviour, toward a broader campaign against conscientious parents.

Theodore Dalrymple, a British writer and doctor, recently wrote of a problem he sees around him: a population of Brits who are "increasingly unable to distinguish the trivial from the important and the virtual from the real." With this current bill in the Senate, select senators are trivializing parenthood by micromanaging how good parents discipline, while turning attention away from real abuse. Most Canadians can tell the difference -- it's a lesson some senators still need to learn.

Andrea Mrozek and Dave Quist conduct and compile research for the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. (www.imfcanada.org).