

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit

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Spare the rod and support the parent

Section 43 of Canada's criminal code states that "Every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances." Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould recently confirmed her government's intent to repeal Section 43 of the Criminal Code that protects parents, and to a lesser extent, teachers, who use "reasonable" force to correct a child's behaviour. Well, welcome to the 21st century!

I am a survivor of all kinds of parental behaviour that I tried hard not to replicate, not always successfully, while raising my own children. In the neighbourhoods where I grew up, flying shoes, threatening wooden spoons, and heavy belts were all considered essential child rearing aids. All were considered "reasonable" at the time.

Repealing Section 43 will be controversial. It does not equate with a ban on the use of physical force nor will it criminalize parents who believe that "spanking" is both legitimate and effective. Some parents contend that they are able to use corporal punishment and not emotionally harm their children as a result. Our law enforcement officers have the discretion to assess when assault is too trivial to merit the force of law. Repealing Section 43 does, however, strengthen child protection efforts in all Canadian jurisdictions and removes the legal justification for physical punishment. The rest of the work, i.e. supporting and educating parents to use positive approaches that do not include physical force, will be ours as a society to own.

Let's be honest, the use of physical force against one's child is usually a sign that the parent has lost it. The child's behaviour has triggered an escalating chain of events that culminate with a parent resorting to assault as a way to "teach a lesson". Surely humanity has evolved to the point where we can all admit that there may be better ways to parent, or at least, role model to our children how to handle frustration or conflict?

Children thrive in stable family environments with warm and caring parent(s) who provide a secure attachment and positive parenting methods. I don't consider spanking a positive strategy with which to correct behaviour. Indeed, research has shown that physical punishment is associated only with immediate obedience.

Clearly, babies and toddlers do not have the reasoning capacity to understand why they are being spanked. They lose trust in their parents, attachment is disrupted, and they have difficulty regulating their stress. For this reason, Section 43 does not apply to children under two years of age. But it is my opinion that spanking an older child erodes parent-child relationships, models the use of force to get one's way, and bypasses the teachable moment. Observational research shows that spanking does not result in children learning right from wrong or behaving more acceptably. In fact, spanking is linked to the opposite: higher levels of child misbehaviour, aggression, and antisocial behaviour, which may persist into adulthood. Physical punishment is associated with an increased risk for mental health

problems in children, youth and adults. The research is consistent, if not methodologically strong. Unfortunately, there are no randomized trials to help us define what may or may not be “reasonable”.

The **Canadian Paediatric Society** strongly recommends using “Positive Discipline” to teach our children.

When discipline is positive, its goals are to:

1. Protect your child from danger.
2. Help your child learn self-control.
3. Help your child learn a sense of responsibility.
4. Help instill values.

As your local public health agency, we want to support all parents in cultivating a unique and enduring bond with your child, regardless of whether or not Section 43 is repealed. If you discipline your child with respect and make sure that it’s consistent and fair, you’ll have lasting positive effects. For more information about positive discipline, call the PCCHU Family HEALTHline and talk to a Public Health Nurse at 705-743-1000.

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