



Reducing physical punishment of children

Using schools as nodes of intervention

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policy brief

Physical punishment is one of the most widespread forms of violence against children in South Africa. Research shows that physical punishment can have detrimental short- and long-term effects on children’s health and psychosocial development. Interventions, policies and programmes targeting physical punishment are therefore urgently needed. This policy brief discusses the prevalence of physical punishment in South Africa, its effects on children and the links between physical punishment and intimate partner violence. The policy brief then presents findings from two school-based interventions that reduced physical punishment: *Skhokho Supporting Success* and the *Good Schools Toolkit*. The policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for future research and interventions.

Background

Physical punishment refers to “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light”.¹ Physical punishment can thus take many forms and includes beatings with an open hand or with a tool (e.g. caning), kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding and forced ingestion.² In South Africa physical punishment is widely used by parents, caregivers and teachers to discipline children.

Physical punishment is invariably degrading and is in conflict with children’s best interests and their rights – to dignity, to bodily and psychological integrity, and to be protected from maltreatment and degradation. These rights are protected under domestic and international law including the Constitution, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC).³

The international committees overseeing the implementation of the UNCRC and the ACRWC have asked the South African government to prohibit all forms of physical punishment and to build the capacity of parents, caregivers and professionals working with children to administer non-violent forms of discipline.⁴ While physical punishment has been prohibited in South African schools for over 20 years,⁵ the common law allowed mild forms of physical punishment in the home until a recent judgment by the South Gauteng High Court.⁶ This judgment struck down the common law defence of ‘moderate and reasonable chastisement’, which previously permitted parents to use physical punishment. However, as illustrated by the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools, a legal ban alone will not curb the use of physical punishment.

Physical punishment is invariably degrading and violates children’s rights.

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007

