

# THE FREE PRESS FOCUS

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## Spare the rod, spare the child?

A child in Great Britain sues his step-father for child abuse after a spanking is administered. An American tourist is charged and subsequently acquitted of child abuse after spanking an unruly child in public. Are these signs of a world gone crazy?

Many would likely side with the parents, arguing a smack on the bottom won't cause any lasting harm to the child, after all most of us where disciplined as a child and we turned out okay (or, so we think).

But for Dr. Marie Hay there is no place for assaulting a child, no matter the justification. The Prince George pediatrician says it's a simple case of respecting human dignity regardless of age. "My body is sacrosanct, you don't have the right to do this (slapping her cheek) to me. But what have I done to earn this right? Or do I own it because I'm intrinsically a human being? Does a child not have that same right?"

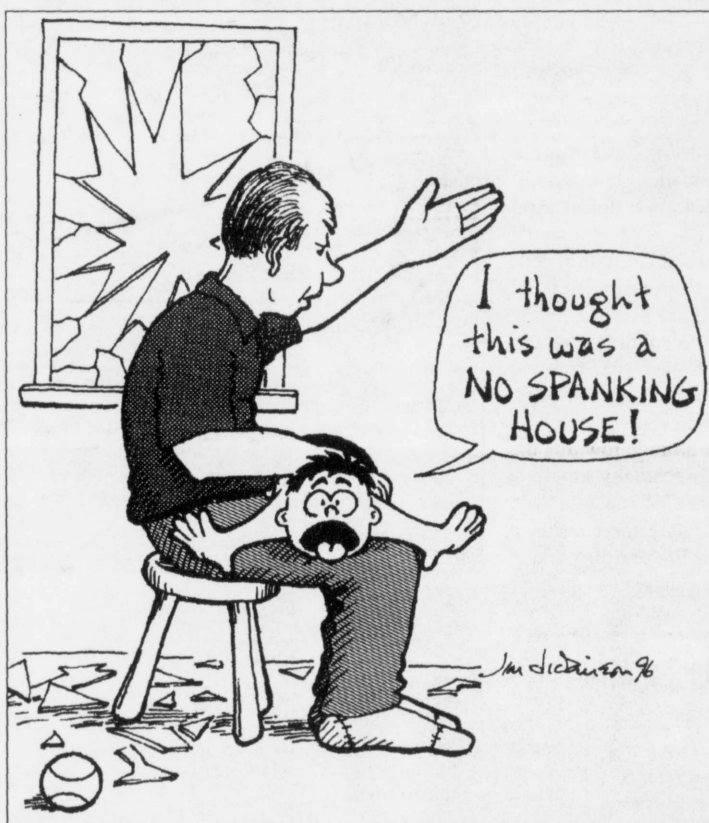
And while she argues a child's basic human rights are being ignored by Canadian law, which still allows a wide-latitude for parents to discipline their off-spring, Dr. Hay is a firm believer that allowing corporal punishment is a major contributor to the social ills of today's modern society.

Proponents of spanking as an effective way to handle an unruly child say there is a massive difference between a swat on the bottom and child abuse, that to compare the two is wrong and an affront to loving parents trying to keep discipline in their child's life.

"The law does recognize that the relationship between a parent and child is different than the relationship between any two other human beings," says Cindy Silver, a lawyer in public policy for the Vancouver-based Focus on the Family organization. "They protect the autonomy of the family and the ability of the family to make a decision on the best form of

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Cindy Silver



discipline."

Ms. Silver argues there are times when it is "justified and reasonable to use force to correct the child." But the mother of three explains Focus on the Family has guidelines when to spank and how to do it properly.

"No more than two swats on the bottom with an open hand and only on children between the ages of two and six, definitely not under two," she says, noting that spanking should be a back-up to non-aversive methods of discipline—such as time-outs or withdrawal of privileges.

Dr. Hay, though, opposes spanking for two reasons: loving parents who lose it and the message that is being sent to children as to what is an appropriate response.

"The definition of spanking is the use of force with the intention of getting a child to experience pain but not injury for the purpose of corrupting or controlling a child's behaviour," she says. "And that teaches the child that might is right and that violence is the way to

resolve conflict."

Kids can get a mixed message, argues Dr. Hay, when a spanking is the punishment for being violent. "If they have hit a younger brother or sister, they're told 'don't hit your sister or don't hit your brother' bang. When you hit a child you're saying it's okay to hit the one you love to get what you want."

Dr. Hay has compiled plenty of evidence to suggest that there is a link between physical punishment and aggressions later in life.

- physical punishment is responsible for the majority of child abuse cases as parents who set out to discipline a child lose control of their anger or underestimate their strength;

- 75 per cent of Canadian parents use physical discipline in their attempts to control or change their child's behaviour;

- linear relationship exists between frequency of spanking and frequency of aggression toward siblings and parents among samples of pre-schoolers;

- juveniles who received physical punish-

ment as children are three times as likely to assault non-family members than those who did not receive this form of discipline; and,

- a large British study revealed that the best predictors of having a criminal record before age 20 are: (1) having been hit once a week or more at age 11 and (2) having a mother strongly committed to corporal punishment at that age.

But Ms. Silver of Focus on the Family says it is important to differentiate between mild spanking and abusive hitting. "I can say with complete confidence, because I've done plenty of research on the subject, there is absolutely no evidence that mild spanking used occasionally by loving parents has any detrimental effect on a child," she argues.

She says doing it in a "loving way" can decrease the chance of violent and anti-social behavior in the future.

Dr. Hay, though, believes striking your child is like letting your four-year-old play with matches—it's incendiary. "Physical abuse leads directly to 50 per cent of child abuse cases and 10 per cent of the cases come from loving parents who lost it or didn't know their own strength or the kid fell and hit their eye on something."

Dr. Hay supports the action taken by Sweden, which have put in place a non-punitive law that outlaws spanking and physical punishment. Through a massive education program and changing of mores, Dr. Hay says Sweden has been able to eliminate death of children by physical abuse (in contrast, more than 50 children die each year in Canada as a result of physical abuse).

Not surprisingly, Ms. Silver disagrees. She says the government has no place in decreeing the proper way to raise a child. "The issue is whether the state should interfere in the family."

Dr. Hay, who is campaigning to have the federal law altered, says it is simply a matter of what's right.

The one thing both women agree on is the need for more education—agreeing that while a test is required to get a driver's licence, there is no such testing before parenthood is bestowed and the realities of raising a child sink in.

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Dr. Marie Hay

Special Report by Shane Mills