

# The 7 reasons people smack their kids – and why they're wrong.

Katharine Cook

The other day I had a small car accident. I told my husband and received the obligatory lecture “you have to take more care....why can't you ever learn?” A while later, I had another small ding with the car so when my husband found out, he was very upset. In response, he hit me- it wasn't hard, just a gentle slap to teach me a lesson.

Does this story make you mad? Horrible isn't it? Luckily, this isn't a true story for me, but one I made up to highlight a point. Very few people accept violence between spouses- even the “smallest” hint of physical harm is not acceptable now days. Then why, oh why, do so many people think that physical punishment of children is still OK? I'm not talking about child abuse. I am talking about use of physical discipline of children. A smack, a slap, a gentle tap....why is our society so tolerant of this?

Many parents will hold firm on the view that they have the right to smack their own children. A recent poll suggested that 70% of people are against banning physical punishment of children. We have banned teachers using the cane, and outlawed people harming other people's children, but the law still allows parents to smack and slap their own. And by keeping physical discipline unlegislated, it sends a message to parents that smacking is fine.

Two generations ago there was widespread tolerance of spousal domestic violence. Some would say “It's between a man and his wife...don't get involved”. The same argument is used now days about smacking children. “Leave it up to the family. Parents should decide what they do in their home. It's their right as the parent”. If you're not sure on the subject -then let's look at the reasons people smack:

1. **“It's the only thing that works with my child”.** Physical discipline doesn't work. It merely creates fear and causes upset. A vast amount of good research shows that smacking is not as effective as other techniques. Behaviour change is ineffective when brought about by fear, it is temporary at best and it teaches the child a whole lot more about how adults manage their emotions, than about the behaviour the parent is trying to control.

2. **“My child is difficult....he doesn't respond to time out ....he needs a good smack.”** If a child has loving caring parents, this excuse doesn't stack up. I have spent years working with children who have conduct disorders and are really challenging. No expert believes those children are best dealt with by physical punishment, our research tells us otherwise. Often the most difficult children need tighter boundaries, need to learn that they are valuable and need to be hugged more often. Smacking will not help your child become less difficult and a more caring and thoughtful human.

3. **“Smacking never did me any harm.”** So maybe you survived childhood despite being driven around without wearing child restraints and you were OK that time that Dad was drunk and drove you home. But we have so much information that tells us that what we believed to be harmless in

the past may not be so now. With new information about alternatives to smacking, people should try to change their behaviour, especially those who are well educated. Why stick to old methods? Our parents and grandparents didn't have the wealth of information about child development and child psychology available to them, they didn't have any alternatives. We do.

4. ***"Smacking is a quick and easy method."*** Since when is parenting meant to be quick and easy? Good parenting is time consuming, it takes perseverance. Teaching children to say please and thank you takes years. Smacking them on the back of the legs is not going to ensure that they don't run onto a road after a runaway ball. Discipline takes time and effort- there is never an easy answer.

5. ***"Smacking teaches them right from wrong."*** How on earth can we expect children to play with other children without hitting each other, if we as adults, teach them with smacks and slaps? How can we expect children to grow up and believe that physical violence is not the best method for resolving conflict, if this is how mum and dad deal with being angry and cross? Children learn how to behave from observing their parents actions and behaviour.

6. ***"You can't reason with a child."*** Children are not stupid and they do respond to reason. We know this from studies of child development. The argument that children need to be taught a quick lesson that they can understand should be dismissed as quickly as the olden day argument about wives needing to be taught a lesson and kept in their place by violence. Time out done properly is time consuming. It takes a whole lot of patience to contend with a child who has clobbered his sibling for the thirtieth time. It is annoying to wait for the child to sit still. It is uncomfortable to have to get down on the floor to be at the child's eye level. It is frustrating to wait for the child to explain what they did wrong. And it is boring to wait for the child to apologise, especially if you know that you'll have to repeat the whole process over and over again.

7. ***"Children have too many rights these days."*** Do women have too many rights? Or Indigenous people? It's a nonsense argument that was used in the past to keep less powerful people in their place. Children are not going to take over! They will always be our most vulnerable members of society.

So if you say "it hurts me, more than it hurts them", then reconsider. Hitting, smacking and slapping a child hurts you because of guilt. Many parents know that there are better less violent options and feel terrible that they have hurt a person that they love. Parents smack because they are upset and haven't been able to think of another option. It's a reaction that comes from anger. I'm sure many people would love to smack another adult sometimes, but most don't because they have learnt strategies for managing their anger. Therefore for those who don't routinely smack their colleagues, or become physically violent towards strangers, it is possible for you to learn to manage anger and use alternatives to smacking.

## What can parents do instead?

1. Don't react immediately. Lock yourself in the bathroom for one minute while the initial anger fades and so you can think of another rational way of dealing with the situation.
2. Learn about the correct way of using time out (or variations of time out), either to diffuse the situation or remove your child from what they are doing.
3. Use logical consequences for children's difficult behaviour.
4. Hug your child and remind them that you know that they are tired/upset/cross and keep hugging until they calm down.
5. Ignore the less serious difficult behaviour. Pick your battles.
6. Reward them for getting things right- and name what they are doing correctly so they want to do it again.
7. Have a "No Hitting anyone" rule. If a child is told that mum and dad don't hit each other or hit the children, then "no hitting your sibling" makes much more sense to them.

One day smacking will be unlawful in Australia and parents will not believe they have a right to harm their child. As people now stand by the need for women to be safe in their own homes, so will people protect children from harm in the future. Any sort of harm. Even a gentle slap.

Katharine Cook is a Child and Family Psychologist who works with people to manage complex issues and solve problems creatively.

